

THE ROMANCE OF THE TWISTED SPEAR

AND OTHER TALES
IN VERSE

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PREFACE

THE following tales are an attempt on the part of the author to endue with flesh and blood the dry bones of Rajput history.

The Rajputs, or “Children of Kings,” are the ancient aristocracy of India. Of their thirty-six royal tribes, twelve are now found in Rajputana, a province about the size of the United Kingdom, where the Rajput chiefs still maintain their independence under the paramountcy of the British dominion. The oldest state is Udaipur, whose ancient capital, Chitor, was founded by Bappa Rawal. Some seventy miles on the east is Bundi, ruled by the Hara Rajputs.

Considering their small numbers, it is wonderful what a stir the Rajputs made in Indian history. They number three-quarters of a million, about one-seventeenth of the population of Rajputana. In former times, when war made havoc in their ranks, the proportion must have been even less; yet they conquered the province and managed to keep their hold over it, and, at the same

time for hundreds of years were engaged in repelling the incursions of foreigners. At the end of the struggle they were the same pure-blooded race, in manners, customs, and language, as at the beginning. Before the Mahomedans came, no race in India could stand up to the Rajput, and even on the advent of British rule, his sword and lance were forces to be held in wholesome dread. His mode of government approximates closely to the feudal system of the Normans ; and in his devotion to war, sport, and athletic exercises, he resembles the Englishman. On no occasion have his arms been turned against the British ; out of all India, the Rajputs alone joined the British alliance as friends and not as conquered foes.

They are fine horsemen, very chivalrous, recklessly brave, and passionately fond of poetry. Each chief maintains a court poet, and Rajput history is exceedingly rich in stirring tales of derring-do. Many of these tales have been set forth in print by Colonel Tod, the historian of the Rajputs ; and in the appendix the author has given extracts from Tod's "Annals of Rajasthan," which will show what foundation exists for the tales in this book.

Different states give different titles to their chiefs, such as Rana, Raja, Rawal, and Rao, all meaning King. The custom of *sati*, where the widow burns herself on

her dead husband's funeral pyre, was very prevalent with the Rajputs even down to mutiny days.

The author has enjoyed the pleasure and privilege of living for nearly thirty years in intimate association with the highest classes of Rajputs. In the present volume he has eschewed local colour as far as possible. Human nature is much the same the wide world over, and with a few alterations his Rajput heroes could become English or French, and fight, and ride, and make love as did the paladins of yore. In a few cases the author has knowingly departed from Indian custom. Moreover his geography is sometimes peculiarly his own. That Nelson at Trafalgar should have adopted on the sea the same tactics which the Rawal in the "Gift of Battle" adopted on land, either proves that Nelson was a student of Rajput strategy, or is merely another instance of history repeating herself.

H. S.

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THE ROMANCE OF THE TWISTED SPEAR

SCENE: CHITOR AND BUNDI

TIME: 1502 A.D.

THE ROMANCE OF THE TWISTED SPEAR

PART I

I

THE FAME OF THE TIGER-CUB

THE feast was o'er and in the garden cool
The nobles lounged on flowered carpets piled
With cushions, listening to the tinkling sound
Of water slipping o'er a fretted slab
Into a polished marble cup. Apart
Upon a trellised platform, sat the king,
The Rana Raemal Singh of Chitorgarh.
A young moon held a rival court above
Mid hosts of twinkling stars. Below, the links
Burned red and smokily. The distant wail
Of jackal to his mate, the chatter shrill
Of owls who spread the latest scandal wide,
The tinkling waterfall, and murmur hoarse

“The night is still and dark,
As he leaves his forest lair.
He glides through the sleeping town,
And creeps up the palace stair.

“He finds the chiefs carousing,
With their women and their wine.
His bright sword falls on Umarkand,
And cleaves him to the chine.

“With a second blow he shears
Through Samarkand’s swarthy neck,
And the Haras * have taken the town,
’Tis little for odds they reckon.

“Let fame his glory spread
O’er the earth with flying wing,
The deathless name of the tiger-cub,
The Hara, Narayn Singh !”

* The Rajputs of Bundi.

II

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE

He ceased. The Rana cried, "And who art thou,
That darest to sing unbidden in my court,
And is the tale thou tellest true or false?
Has Bando's son expelled the Moslem horde,
Or is it but the lying, idle song
Of idler bard?" The youth prostration made.
"Great King, my name is Hari Raj. A bard
Am I, but one of little fame. My sire
Was Kaviraj to Bundi's aged Rao. Though oft
I've framed a song of tissue light as air,
This tale I've told is true. Myself did see
The young Rao's ravening blade sweep through the neck
Of Samarkand, and passing on, cut deep
Into a marble pillar, while the head
Danced grinning on the pavement, and the trunk
Fell bloodily across his leman's lap.
Myself did follow, while the hero reaped
A goodly harvest with his sickle red,
And in his footsteps even I did glean
A stalk or two to bind me in a sheaf.
Ten days have barely passed since Rao Narayn
Purged clean the town and mounted on his throne.

He sendeth me, his humble messenger,
To the Great King, his cousin, with the news.
I pray Your Majesty to pardon me,
The lowly bard, who did in bardic wise
His master's errand; with a foolish song
Proclaimed his master's deeds; but when I thought
Of that wild night of battle, all my soul
Burned hot with fire of sacred poesie,
And forced me frame my tale in rushing verse.
My master bids me say, 'The Moslem wave
Beat back from Bundi Towers, has gathered force,
And threatens to o'erwhelm our Rajasthan.'"
The Rana laughed, "These bards are garrulous folk.
Great Heavens, man! thy tongue trots tireless on
Like Bikaneri camel. Does the Rao
Want aid from me? Give answer in a word!"
"Not so, Great King, but offers friendly aid
To Mewar's pride, the city Chitorgarh.
Should the barbarian storm . . ." The Rana raised
His hand. "Peace, peace!" Then turned a glowing eye
Upon his chiefs. "What say ye, lieges mine?
Can our right hands defend our homes and hearths?
Or must we crave the aid of Bundi's Rao?"
A growl went round the court. The Thala twirled
His long moustache. "The lion does not crave
The grace of any Bundi tiger's whelp."

The bard drew down his brows. “We offer aid
As friend to friend.” The Rana interposed,
“As tributary chief to his liege lord.
The Bundi fief is in my royal gift.”
The bard spoke hotly, “With the lance and sword
The Haras won their realm, and with the sword
And lance they hold it still. They look on thee,
Great King, as overlord ; but, free as air,
The Hara makes submission unto none.”
The Rana cried, “Enough, enough. Why wake
A sleeping quarrel ? Bold thou art and hast
A ready tongue. What letter dost thou bring ?”
“This from my lord the Rao, to thee, Great King.”
And after deep obeisance, the bard
Presented an epistle hung with seals.

The Rana oped and read. “By Bappa’s beard !
This cub’s a full-grown tiger in his roar.
He offers aid. Desires to recreate
Our ancient friendship, and as strong cement
To this new bond of union, begs our grace
Bestow on him the hand of Ketu Bai,
Our youngest daughter. Say I not the truth,
This cub will never sicken from excess
Of modesty ? ” The bard spoke loud and firm.
“Is this the answer that I carry back ?

Guard well your marches, for the Hara's blow
Follows upon the taunt as close as night
Treads on the heels of day." Chondawat's lord
Whispered a word into the Rana's ear.

"Our men are few, for Prithwi Raj, thy son,
Has marched with fifty thousand of our horse
Against the southron foe. Take heed, my king!
The Hara ne'er forgives."

The Rana mused

A moment with a troubled brow, then cried,
"This is our answer, which anon the scribe
Will give thee duly worded, signed and sealed.
The Rao's accession and the dire defeat
Of Moslem infidel has filled our hearts
With joy to overflow. We thank the Rao
For proffered aid. The Princess Ketu Bai,
Our daughter, is too young for marriage ties.
We make no treaty. Only beg delay,
One year or two. Then, when the plunging steed
Is docile to the bit, ourselves will hold
The cup of wedlock to the rider's lips.
But as for thee, thou art our welcome guest,
And speaking boldly in thy master's cause,
We honour thee the more." The Rana waved
His hand. The chiefs arose and crying, "Peace
To thee, Great King!" bowed low and went their way.

III

THE PRINCESS AND THE BARD

Behind the lattice of the balcony,
Sat Princess Ketu, hearkening every word
With greedy ears. “Dost hear, Rohet?” she cried,
“A marriage offer, by great Cupid’s bow!
My first! And what replies my worthy sire?
‘I am too young, must wait a year or two.’
What folly! Sixteen summers have I seen.
Or does he wish me grey and toothless ere
My wedding day?” Rohet, old Bhairo’s niece,
Due answer made to soothe the ruffled heart
Of her young mistress. “’Tis the wooer whom
The Rana disallows, not thee, Princess.”

“Refuse or choose, must I not have a word
In giving soul and body, heart and hand?
What’s that thou sayest? ‘The custom of our land!’
More shame to Rajput knights, who ever prate
Devotion to their laws of chivalry.
But listen, maiden mine, I am exempt
From this same foolish custom, even I,
Thy little feather-headed princess, am
The first to gain full liberty of choice

In what concerns me most. "Twas yester eve,
 I cajóled my good sire with every wile
 From woman's armoury—thou knowest how dear
 He loves me, child of his old age and last
 To leave the nest—until he yielded, swore
 By Bappa's * head, to give me my desire,
 That every suitor to my hand should first
 Be seen and well approved by me, and none
 Should wed me 'gainst my will."

"A fearsome boon,
 My princess!" cried Rohet. "We are not born
 To freedom like the men, and as for me,
 I take what gods and parents shall ordain.
 My shame would kill me if I were required
 To judge a man and choose a future spouse."
 "Tut! tut! thou art a slave who hugs her bonds,"
 Replied the princess. "See, there goes the bard
 Of Bundi. Call him here! Behind this screen
 I'll speak to him. And place the light to shine
 Upon his face! I'll wager I will probe
 The very heart-strings of his tiger-cub."

The minstrel came, and, after bending low
 Before the jewelled screen, expectant stood
 With folded arms. "Thy master, Rao Narayn,
 What like of man is he?" The voice rang clear

* The founder of the kingdom of Chitor.

And sweet as silver bell, yet with a hint
Of latent raillery. "I pray thee tell
The limpid truth, if such is in the power
Of famous bard, so gifted as thyself."
"Of heroes brave, he is the perfect gem,
The jewel of renown." The hidden voice
Laughed long and loud. "If tropes and flowers of
speech
Were banned, methinks the tribe of bards would soon
Be sick to death with dumbness. Tell me straight
In simple words what women want to know.
Omit all tales of heroism. Pah !
They smell of blood. But is he tall or short,
Or fair or dark? and chiefly, mark this well,
Has he a comely face, a merry eye,
Or in his blood-drinking has he become
As fierce and ugly as the tiger-cub
They call him?"

Smiled the bard, "Your Highness' word
Shall be obeyed. The Rao is six foot three,
His weight eleven score pounds." "He weighs his Rao
And measures him, as our hunt-master Bhim
Measures and weighs a stricken stag." "The truth
All unadorned, is what Your Highness bid
Me tell." "Then lend her some apparel lest
She die of cold ! Could woman's feeble wit

E'er hope to win the vantage of a bard?"

The minstrel bowed. "My master is a knight
Beyond compare in high nobility
Of deed and word. His courage runs to meet
The foe. The breath of danger is to him
A wine of ecstasy. He has the strength
Of ten. His face is beautiful as Rama's.
His colour tanned and dark." The bard's quick ear
Caught just the faintest tremour of a sigh
Behind the screen. "For two long years
No roof has sheltered him. He loves a merry bout,
Is open-handed, joyous, gallant, true,
The perfect type of courteous cavalier."

"Hold! hold!" the princess cried. "Another word
And thou'lt excite the envy of the gods.
Is this an angel or the petty chief
Of Bundi village? Tell me, if thou darest,
One little thing! What is his special fault,
His trifling peccadillo, darling sin?
It cannot be your sun has ne'er a speck
To mar his radiance." Silent stood the bard,
As with bent head, he strove to hide the blush
That rose unwelcome to his cheek and brow.
"Ah! ha! my random shaft has scored a hit,
E'en in the centre. Well, thou wilt not tell.

I do not blame thee. Take this purse of gold !
In thee thy master has a messenger
Most loyal and discreet, and so, farewell ! ”

IV

A MADCAP SCHEME

That night the little princess could not sleep.
A madcap scheme ran riot in her brain,
And sent her pulses racing with the charm
Of its dare-devilry. So when the dawn
Peeped blushing through her casement, she awoke
Rohet, her handmaid, sleeping on the ground
Across the door, a faithful bar to step
Of evil-doer. “ Listen ! ” Ketu cried,
“ To-morrow I will ride to Bundi Towers,
And all unseen, with my own eyes will view
And pass in judgment this same Rao of theirs,
Who dares aspire to hand of Ketu Bai.”
“ Your Highness, art thou mad ? or has some dream
Bewildered thy poor brain ? ” “ Not so, Rohet !
We two can ride as well as any men,
Despite their boasting. Bundi lies scarce three
Days’ journey hence. Within eight days at most

We shall be back in Chitorgarh and none
A whit the wiser."

Cried the startled maid,
"Sweet Lady, hear one little word of sense !
'Tis all a folly and thy gracious sire——"
"One little word, Rohet ; art thou afraid
To follow where I lead ?" "My wayward queen,
Thou knowest it is not so. I do not share
Thy courage reckless of all consequence.
Wert thou a man, thou wouldst out-hero e'en
Great Bappa's self. But in my bosom, love
For thee supplies the place of courage, dares
Do all that courage dares, and where thou goest
There I will follow to the bitter end.
I do not fear the danger, but the shame.
It is not maidenly for girls to ride
Upon this graceless venture, secretly
To spy upon a man. The Rana ne'er
Would grant his sanction to request so strange
And ill-advised."

Fair Ketu's little chin
Was lifted high in protest. "My good sire
Has given me his promise. I can see
And of myself adjudge the suitors who
Lay claim to this small hand. The breath of fame
Has blown some rumour to the Bundi Rao

Of one they call the Rose of Chitorgarh.
He'll press his suit. The Rana needs must yield,
And spite of royal promise, word and oath,
Thy Ketu will be bartered like a sheep.
'Tis now or never I must exercise
The right of choice. This perfect pearl of men
Contains some pitted speck, defect or vice,
I know it by the minstrel's guilty face ;
Which let me once discover, I shall be
Again the mistress of my fate and match
For all the Raos and Ranas in the land."

"But thy fond father ne'er will give consent
For thee to ride to Bundi on this quest."
The princess clapped her tiny hands and laughed.
"Dost judge so meanly of my feather-head ?
My poor Rohet, the Rana ne'er shall know
Where we do ride nor why. Go, call the priest,
Grave Har Bilas ! and now or never wit
Of woman wins the game from dullard man."

Rohet sighed deep. 'Twas not the first wild plan
In which she had abetted Ketu Bai.
The princess laughed again, for well she knew,
Rohet's remonstrances and tears and fears
Once swept aside, the maid would follow where
The mistress led with courage unsurpassed.

When came the priest, a lean and hungry man,
The princess loosed a necklace strung with pearls.
“’Tis thine, my Reverend Father.” Keen the eyes
Of the old miser shone with greed of gain.
He took it quickly, mumbled out his thanks,
Then after bowing low, he turned to leave.
“But not for nothing,” cried the girl. “E’en saints
Demand reward for acts of piety.
Then why not fragile sinners like myself.”
A look of doubt o’erspread the eager face
Of Har Bilas, but still with loving touch,
His fingers felt and valued every pearl.

“Whate’er is consonant—” the aged priest
Began reply, when quick the girl broke in.
“That eloquent preamble many times
We’ve heard, and pass it gladly now. The point
Is this. Great Har Bilas, the famous seer,
The man of wisdom, prophet, humbug, priest,
From nightly study of the moving stars,
Has come to know some danger threatens the state,
And but one path of safety is vouchsafed.
Let spotless maiden of the royal house
Proceed on pilgrimage to holy shrine
Of Parvati, on Lamia mountain high,
Some three days’ journey hence, and offer prayers

With her pure breath ! The falling blow will turn,
And Chitorgarh be saved from utter loss."

The necklace swiftly vanished in the vest
Of Har Bilas, who coughing, cleared his throat.
"'Tis wonderful Your Highness should have guessed
The strange conclusion which my vigils long
And nightly study of the stars evolved
This very morn.'" He smiled a gentle smile,
And bowing disappeared.

"Thou seest, Rohet,
How far a little wit and wisdom go."
"The men might call thy wit by harsher name."
"Thou meanest lies. 'Tis true, for woman's wit
Begins, continues, ends, in well-thought lies."
"Thou spokest just now of danger 'gainst the state,"
Replied Rohet. "Perchance Your Highness' wit
Hath spoken truth for once. The Bundi Rao
Sent word of warning that the Moslem hordes
Would burst on Chitorgarh. Dost think thy sire
Will let his daughter ride on pilgrimage,
When these grim wolves are ranging for their prey ? "
"His warning had a taint of woman's wit.
Dost think the Moslems, beaten by the Rao,
Would run atilt against the mighty fort
Where rules my warlike sire ? 'Twas mere excuse
For proffering aid and friendship. So the king

Believed and did not hide his thought. For us
 'Twill be a merry jaunt to hunt the Rao,
 Instead of hare or deer. Old Daulat Singh
 Shall lead the body-guard of men-at-arms,
 Some eight or ten. We'll choose the choicest steeds,
 And bad indeed our luck if we don't live
 To laugh at Rao and Rana, foe and friend."

V

AT NAYAGANW

Next day, the sun's large eye was peeping o'er
 The world's round rim, when open swung the gate
 Of Chitor's citadel. Two ladies, veiled,
 Rode slowly through on well-knit Arab steeds
 Of purest desert breed. Some paces back
 Came Daulat Singh, a veteran tempered hard
 By fifty years of war, with half a score
 Of troopers of the guard, whose steeds were like
 The riders, tough, warwise, and lean. Due south
 They headed toward the distant mountain peak
 Of Lamia. Four hours at gentle rate,
 They rode, then stayed the day at Nayaganw.

And here upon the morrow strife arose
Between the pilgrims and the veteran chief,
Who led the guard. The ladies wished to march
Due east. The stubborn Daulat Singh averred
His orders were due south. He ate the salt
Of Chitor's king, and him he would obey
Until the death. In vain the princess stormed,
And raged, then cajoled, flattered, teased,
The Rajput would not waver from his word.
All day the strife continued. By the dusk
A truce was called, and Daulat Singh agreed
To send a trooper back to Chitorgarh,
With letters for the Rana and the priest,
And wait for answer there at Nayaganw.
“Against all discipline,” the soldier growled.
“For obstinate stupidity commend
Me to a man !” the weary princess moaned,
Then threw herself exhausted on her couch.

The sun had climbed a spear's length up the sky,
Upon the morrow, when a jaded steed
Went floundering up the narrow village street,
And lurching through the archway, dropped and died
Inside the courtyard of the headman's house,
Where lodged the princess. Stiff and reeling rose
The rider, slipped and falling to the ground,
He murmured, “Water, for the love of God !”

His head was bandaged and an arrow stuck
 Half through his shoulder. Quick the little troop,
 Old Daulat and the princess, gathered round ;
 The ladies white and wild-eyed, but the men
 Silent and stern.

The trooper drank his fill,
 Then whispered huskily, " The Moslem horde,
 A mighty host, besiege the city wall.
 No going out nor entry. Riding round,
 I fell into an ambush. Cheytuc there
 Has paid his life away to purchase mine."
 His message told, the strength of will, which braced
 Him over many a weary league, gave way.
 He swooned and sank into a comrade's arms.
 They gave him cordials, washed and bound his
 wounds,—

'Twas Ketu's hand that drew the arrow shaft
 With tender strength and skill,—then laid him down
 To sleep and take his rest.

" 'Tis nothing," said
 Old Daulat Singh. " The man is young and hard ;
 But as for thee, my princess, thou canst go
 Nor back nor forward, neither east nor south.
 Though why when ordered south by strict command
 Of Raemal Singh, thy father, thou should'st wish
 To journey east, it passes wit of man

To say." The princess sighed. For once her tongue
Replied not to a challenge. "Perilous
Indeed our state," she murmured. "What wouldst thou
Advise, my trusty captain of the guard?"
Old Daulat muttered, "Yesterday 'twas fool,
And thick-head. Times are changed in truth." Then cried,
"Your Highness, we must stay e'en where we are.
This village, with its wall and hundred men,
Will guard against a plundering raid, but should
A host advance, the people, great and small,
Will take them to their hills and woods, and we
Must ride——" "But where," the princess questioned,
"shall
We shelter find? My brother, Prithwi Raj,
Is distant many hundred miles."

The chief

Pondered awhile, and scratched his grizzled head.
"Somewhat I heard of aid the Bundi Rao
Proffered our king; but, suitor for thy hand
Your Highness might not wish——" A radiant smile
Lit up fair Ketu's face. "In truth the Rao,
A very brave and gallant gentleman,
Would deem it highest honour to have charge
Of damsels in distress. 'Tis then agreed.
In case of need, we ride to Bundi Towers."

The puzzled captain felt that unawares

He'd been outwitted, shrugged his shoulders, turned
And made his dispositions. Men were put
To man the wall, the troopers rode to bring
The earliest news of enemy in force,
And trusty spies were sent to Chitorgarh,
If haply they might entry find and learn
The Rana's orders.

Two days passed in fear
And sleepless watch, and sudden panics bred
Of idle rumour. Then at night a spy
Stole quickly in. "The wall he could not climb,
But by a lucky chance had met the chief
Who rode as royal herald to the Rao
To beg for aid."

The princess clapped her hands
In secret colloquy with her Rohet.
"The fates are aye propitious to the brave."
The maid replied, "Art sure, my little queen,
No deeper feeling wakens in thy heart?"
The princess reddened. "Thou art overbold.
I love no man. This Rao has courage great
And strength, to dare and do the noblest deeds.
Of such a man, two errant maids forlorn
Do stand in urgent need." "When shines the sun,
* The day's begun," Rohet sang softly, while
A deeper colour mantled Ketu's face.

Next day at noon, the troopers galloped back
In headlong race. "One thousand Moslem horse
Are marching on the town. No safety save
In instant flight!" At once the villagers,
Like bees in angry trepidation, swarmed
From out their houses, laden with their goods;
Their sick and young and aged, driving goats
And sheep and cattle, vanished in the woods,
Or climbed the rocky hills. Within the hour,
The town was tenantless, except for crows
And whistling kites. Two hardy rustics bore
The wounded trooper to a hidden cave
In forest deep, the empty den of bear
Or tiger fierce. This done, the little troop,
The ladies in the centre, swiftly rode
Towards the east.

 The men were silent all,
And e'en the ready tongue of Ketu Bai
Forbore to gibe and banter. Since her hands
Were soiled with blood in drawing out the shaft,
She seemed no more a girl, but woman grown,
Her eyes more serious and her lips more firm.

VI

THE GAP OF GOPALPUR

Old Daulat rode with many a backward glance.
But when two hours were gone, he drew his rein,
And cried, "The danger's passed. An undue haste
May prove our ruin. We must nurse our steeds
In case of sudden onset and pursuit
From men in ambush." So at gentle pace
They rode till nightfall, when the troopers made
Their bivouac near a jungle stream. Beneath
A rock they piled up leaves to form a couch
For Ketu and Rohet. Themselves lay down
Beside their tethered steeds, their shields beneath
Their heads and good swords tied to sinewy wrists.

Awhile the princess marked the sentry pace
His round, then looking to the dark-blue vault
Above her, watched the young moon swim through
waves

Of fleecy cloud, each wavelet tipped with stars.
"Rohet," she murmured, "in my breast I feel
A something kin to joy and sorrow blent,
Yet greater joy than sorrow. Like a bird
It flutters, leaving me at times agasp,
Expecting what I know not, joy or pain.

Dost think?" She turned. Rohet was fast asleep.
A gentle sigh went up and bore the soul
Of Ketu to the enchanted land of dreams.

The second day and third, by lonely paths
They rode in long détour, e'er keeping guard
'Gainst sudden sally from a hidden troop.
The hamlets all were desert. Here and there
They found a rustic armed with sword and spear,
Seated in anxious watch on hill or tree,
While his lean cattle cropped in haste the leaves
And scanty herbage of the plain beneath.
From every side they heard the selfsame tale
Of Moslem fury, rapine, and assault.

When dawned the fourth day, gaily Daulat cried,
"To-day our toil is o'er. Ere evening falls,
We enter Bundi Towers." The eyes of all
Shone bright with thought of danger past, and
hope

Of rest and ease to come. The ladies laughed,
The troopers bandied jests. E'en Daulat Singh
Relaxed his ceaseless watchfulness, to hum
An ancient lay of love.

A waking rude
Was theirs, when at a sudden turning blew
A bugle shrill, and on the instant burst
From coppice green, in furious charge, a troop

Of thirty riders, heads bent down and spears
That bore the Moslem pennons green, laid low
In rest. Old Daulat seized the princess' rein,
With nervous arm and bloody spur swung round
The restive steeds upon their haunches thrown,
And holding still his grip, he urged the beasts
To frantic flight. His troopers with Rohet
Came thundering in the rear.

The captain rode

With beard on shoulder, keenly taking note
Of his pursuers. "Truth!" he cried in jerks
And broken bits of speech, "Our feast is like
To be beyond our appetites. Their steeds
Are of the best. They gain with every stride.
Their armour lined with gold and golden thread
Upon the saddles. Moslem chiefs, I ween.
But why pursuit so headlong? We can give
More blows than booty. Ah! I fear they see
The charges that we guard. To Moslem dog
A woman's eye the best and choicest prize."
The princess paled. Her hand stole quickly down
And felt the jewelled dagger at her waist.

The path divided. "Left, my lady, left!
Our only hope the gap of Gopalpur!"
The mountains narrowed in. Another mile

The pass was reached. In single, rapid file,
They galloped to the gap. A sudden turn,
And lo, the broad plain opened out again.
Here Daulat leaped to earth and with his sword
He cut his horse's throat. The gallant brute
Sank down and sobbed his piteous life away.
Upon the moment round the corner came
The foremost foeman, galloping loose-reined,
To fall a heap of tangled legs and arms
Upon the dying horse, when, swift as light,
Old Daulat's eager sabre found its way
Into his heart. A trooper stabbed the steed.

The captain shouted, "Fly, my lady, fly!
The only chance!" "What! leave my gallant
men

To die for me! Nay, rather I will kill
Myself. Their prize escaped, perchance the foe
Will stop the fight." Again the little hand
Went swiftly to her belt; but Daulat Singh
Once more amid the din of carnage cried,
"My lady, fly, the only chance!" Rohet
Drew quickly near, and with her whip she struck
With all her force the princess' prancing steed.
The maddened Arab parted like a bolt.
A few short moments and the din of strife

Was left behind. Two frightened girls forlorn
Were galloping across a wide-spread plain.
The broad sun shone with genial smile above,
The birds sang loud, the wild deer played around,
All nature seemed at festival, and save
The riders' tightened lips and fear-strained eyes,
Naught showed that death was busy on the trail
That stretched behind.

Three leagues in silence passed,
Then Ketu said, "I'll ne'er forgive that blow.
It cast away the lives of ten brave men."
Rohet replied, "'Twere most ungenerous
Not to accept a gift, the gift of life,
When proffered by a man who dies in giving."
A solitary tear, the first, slid from
Fair Ketu's eye, and in her galloping,
It backward flew to stand a shining gem
In her disordered hair. "I wish," she sighed,
"I had not called him thick-head, fool, and dolt.
A wiser, nobler hero never died
In service of a giddy woman's whim."

VII

THE TWISTED SPEAR

The words were scarcely spoken, when they turned
A purple hill that stood knee-deep in trees,
And ere the two could utter cry, or lash
Their rearing steeds, on all sides men-at-arms
Sprang forth and seized their bridles. "Who are ye?"
A gruff voice called, "who ride so fast and free
On Bundi land?" The girls' wild scream
Broke down to sobs of heart-felt gratitude.
"Thank God, the Rajput speech!" Though hoarse and
 stern,
It never sounded half so sweet before.
"We ride on errand to the Bundi Rao,"
The princess cried, but hardly mastering
Her trembling lips. "We come from Chitorgarh.
Our gallant escort checks the hot pursuit
Of Moslem infidel a dozen miles
From here, one man to three. I pray ye send
Them instant aid."
 "We live 'neath iron rule,"
A man replied, "and short would be our shrift,
Did we do aught without our leader's word."
"Then take me to him," Ketu begged, her tears

Blotting her face. "No Rajput e'er refused
The call of woman in distress." "You'll find
Him under yonder tree." The soldier raised
His lance. "But well I ween, no deadwood log
Was ever half so torpid as our chief."
A throaty laugh went round the bearded crowd.
"And who is he?" the princess asked. "The Rao
Narayn Singh of Bundi. We, his troop
Of thousand horse, summoned in urgent haste
To aid the Rana trapped in Chitorgarh."

The princess slid to earth and quickly ran,
Rohet behind her, to the spreading tree
The soldier marked. It was a pipal * tall,
That twined its grey arms round an ancient well.
Beneath its shade the wondering girls beheld
A man, who lay at length, in attitude
Not stiff like death's, and yet without the ease
Of one who lies in pleasant slumber deep.
The body huge, a giant's, neck and arms
And mighty chest were bare, the massive limbs
In strange contortions one on other lay,
Though still a hand gripped tight a heavy spear.
The head was resting on a stone. The eyes
Were closed. The mouth, as of an imbecile,
Was open and the buzzing flies flew in

* Pronounced "people."

And out, or settled on the slaver white
Upon his lips. Rohet drew backward. "Faugh !
The sot is drunk to blindness with the draught
Of amal * water. See the jar he holds !"

The princess crouched as if from sudden blow.
Her dream of dawning love was shattered all
To thinnest air. "Was this the pitted speck,
The trifling peccadillo, she had bid
The bard disclose? Nay, rather rottenness,
Corruption foul of body, mind and soul !"
She clasped her hands in anguish, crying loud.
"Alas for Daulat and his gallant men !
No hope for them ! Alas for Chitorgarh !
If this is all the aid that she can find
In her necessity."

The weeping girl
Forgot or ne'er had heard the proverb true,
"The amal drunkard has no eyes. His ears
Are long as asses'." Swift and sudden, leapt
The giant to his feet. His blood-shot eyes
Shone red and lurid as with frenzied roar
He rushed upon the terror-stricken girls,
And caught the flying princess by the hair.
"What's that thou sayest? Is the Bundi Rao
A thing beneath contempt, a mark and butt

* Opium.

For woman's mockery?" He seized his spear,
Whose blade and shaft were heavy, tempered steel.
With superhuman force, he wound it twice
About the shrinking maiden's slender waist,
And twisted to the ends. With grating teeth
He laughed, "This pretty garland wear for me,
Until I drive the Moslem host and save
Thy dotard chief," and then with thunderous roar,
He yelled, "To horse!" and strode with giant
 strides

To where his charger stood among the trees.

The scene had passed like hideous dream of sound
And fury, where the dreamer drags his limbs
And devils aye pursue. Rohet was first
To find her scattered wits. "My princess sweet,
I fear the brute has hurt thy tender waist.
Was ever manly strength more foully used?"

The princess smiled a little woful smile.

"If this be Rajput welcome, let us join

The Moslem Turk!" A shudder shook her frame.

"The monstrous beast," she groaned, "I see him
 still,

His blood-shot eyes, and hateful face. I feel
Again his loathsome touch." "But art thou hurt?"
The princess wore a puzzled look. "'Tis strange,
His hands were light as air. I scarcely felt

Their touch, except as insult to my pride,
An insult only blood can wash away.”
Her little teeth snapped tight, her dark eyes flashed.
“ But as for this, his garland, I will guard
It safe against the day of reckoning.”
She slipped it o’er her shoulders. “ Why do we
Waste time in idle chatter, while our men
Are dying close at hand and aid so near?
Draw down our veils! Here comes the youthful
bard.”

Upon the roaring shout of “ Horse, to horse ! ”
The wood was buzzing like an upturned hive
With men who ran to tighten girths and mount,
To follow their grim leader, who had swung
Himself upon a steed of ponderous frame,
And issuing curt commands, had ridden forth
Towards the setting sun.

The bard approached
The veiled women waiting by the well.
“ My master bids ye mount and join his force.”
“ What right is his to bid? and what if we
Refuse to do his bidding! Are we slaves,
Or captives ta’en in war?” The bard was struck
As if by lightning stroke. “ The princess,” cried
He, open-eyed in marvellous amaze.
“ What does Your Highness in this lonely spot?

Is this a dream or do two women live
Whose voices have the cadence of love's lute."
"A truce to bardic flattery," replied
Fair Ketu Bai. "Our tale is quickly told.
While journeying on pious pilgrimage,
We rode into a Moslem ambush, whence
We scarce escaped with life, not two hours past.
At gap of Gopalpur our guard holds back
The hot pursuit, one man to three. By all
The Gods the Rajputs worship, I adjure
Thee send them instant aid."

The princess clasped

Her hands in wild entreaty. Half her veil
Fell back and showed two lustrous eyes, brimful
Of welling tears. The bard exclaimed, "No need
Of adjuration! For thy sake alone,
My princess, will I send a rescuing troop."
And muttering, "'Tis death if our mad Rao
Discovery makes, before his mood is passed,"
He ran to where the rearmost of the guard
Were climbing into saddle, said a word
Of brief authority, and soon a band
Of twenty riders galloped towards the south.

This done, he swift retraced his steps. "My queen,
The Rao has bid me bring thee with the force
That rides to Chitorgarh, and in his mood

Of present madness, blood will surely flow
If ye oppose his will. But should he learn
To whom he offered base indignity,
His shame would drag him back to reason. He
Would be thy slave to do the least command
Your Highness bade." The maiden fiercely spoke.
"I'd rather die than let the monster know
That he has placed a ruffian hand upon
A princess of the Rana's royal house.
A day will dawn when he shall learn the truth,
A day without an evening. Let us mount!"
The bard delayed. "'Tis fifty weary miles
Of hill and forest to the distant fort
Of Chitorgarh. A dozen hours will take
Us there. The Rao will strike at dawn. Dost think
Your Highness' gentle limbs can bear the strain?"
"And if 'twere fifty leagues, I'll ride all night,
Till nature fail me, but I will not tell
My name," the angry girl replied. "Lead on
And keep my secret close!"

VIII

THE MIDNIGHT RIDE

They joined at speed
The line of horsemen, riding two and two,
That crept a devious way, like some great snake,
Across the plain. Nor drew they rein until
They reached the foremost rider, sitting hunched,
Malformed, ungainly, on his pacing steed.
One savage look he threw them, said no word,
Then bent again his eyes to track the way.
The sun had set, and spite of moon and stars,
Beneath the forest trees the ground was dark,
The glimmering path uncertain. Broken trunks,
And rocks and chasms deep, on every side
Waylaid the straggler's steps, yet never once
Those brooding, sullen eyes were found in fault.
They seemed to concentrate all power of sense
Within their glaring orbs, to hear, to smell and feel.
They tracked the path as if 'twere broadest day,
Without mistake or falter. Following close,
The troopers rode, some half asleep, but all
As silent as the grave. The horses, bred
In forest wild, were sure of foot and hard
And tough as trees. The men, a chosen band

Of Haras, bred to every ruse of war,
And ready ever at their leader's word,
To stake their lives upon a gambler's throw,
'Gainst tenfold odds.

At midnight halt was called
Beside a rivulet, to water men
And thirsty steeds. The leader in advance
Despatched two spies to thread the Moslem lines,
Ascend the wall and warning bring the king,
"At dawn the Rao strikes home, and looks for aid
From sudden sally of the force besieged."
"If ye succeed, a royal gift to each.
If not, and ye are wise, ye will not see
My face again," the big man growled, and drank
The cooling stream, and stretched himself to rest.

Fair Ketu Bai had ridden bravely through
The weary hours. Her pride of blood and race
Had lent her strength and kept her courage high,
But as the leagues slipped slowly past, her ride
Grew strange, unreal, ghostly as a dream.
The forest weird, whence unknown voices called,
The shadowy hills, the moonlight and the stars,
The silent troopers and the stamping steeds,
And that huge stooping figure, whose great eyes
She saw at times aglint beneath the moon—
Was all a fantasy or actual truth?

The twisted spear hung at her saddle bow,
 And as she felt it swing, the glowering wrath
 Would surge to fury in her woman's breast.
 But presently her mood would slowly change
 To wonder of the man, who knew the woods
 Like his own hand. He seemed all-powerful,
 Dreaded, yet trusted, and obeyed with blind
 Devotion by his men.

The bard's wild tale

Of deeds heroic came to her again.
 The mystery of the man, his giant strength,
 Made strong appeal to Ketu's girlish heart.
 In spite of wounded pride, a feeling kin
 To admiration stole into her breast.
 "If only he were clean and pure from vice,
 This is the man that I . . ." she broke off short,
 And thanked the darkling forest that it hid
 Her burning face.

When halt was called, Rohet,

Who thought to comfort by abuse of him
 They dreaded, found her mistress in a mood
 Of tired petulance. "Go, get me food!"
 The princess cried, "if any can be found
 In this wild wilderness, and let us eat
 And sleep! Thy railing wearies me. The man,
 No devil he, but human after all.

With scarce one thousand horse, he dares engage
Ten thousand foes to save our Chitorgarh.
It angers me, our sex can never curb
Their foolish tongues."

At once she ceased and bent
Her ear to listen. Was it grunt of boar,
Or cough of crouching pard, or smothered laugh
Of man that came from yonder bush-clad rock?
Or was the proverb that the girl forgot
Again fulfilled? The princess never learned.

"How easterly the western wind doth blow,"
Rohet said 'neath her breath, and went to seek
The bard, who brought them food and spread a cloak
For couch. The maidens drank the stream, and bathed
Their faces in the cooling wave, then ate
Rough soldier's fare, and slept the dreamless sleep
Of utter weariness.

In two short hours

The minstrel woke them. "Please Your Highness, rise!
The troop is marching and we dare not leave
Thee here where bear and tiger roam, nor can
We spare a guard, when every fighting man
Is sorely needed for the coming fray."
The princess leaned upon her arm and said,
In failing tones, "In truth I cannot ride
Another mile. My body perishes

From weariness." "No need is there," the bard
 Replied. "By order of the Rao I bring
 A litter for Your Highness and your maid,
 If you will deign to rise." He pointed where
 Two horses bore a couch of fresh-cut boughs,
 Most cunningly contrived and slung with ropes
 Between the steeds. Close by a soldier held
 A flaring torch. The princess put her hand
 To shade her dazzled eyes. "Dost see, Rohet?"
 She laughed, "Our monster melts, and soon perchance
 Will incarnate to polished gentleman,
 As from the clay the potter fashions fair
 A beauteous jar." Rohet said with a yawn,
 "Our clay was passing muddy."

"Peace, I beg!"

The minstrel whispered low. "The mood has passed.
 My master is himself once more, thank God.
 With all my soul I pray Your Highness grant
 Him pardon for the shame he wrought in hour
 Of brutish folly, ignorant of all
 He did. The chrysalis expires and swift
 The butterfly mounts up on wings of light.
 Once more the Rao is courteous cavalier,
 The perfect type of high nobility."
 "Enough!" the girl broke in. "'Twill be high noon
 E'er thou hast sailed thy bark o'er river wide

Of poet's eulogy." She mounted light
The litter with Rohet, and soon the girls
Were fast asleep, lulled by the rocking swing
Of horses ambling swift.

IX

THE DAWN OF A NEW WORLD

The column long
Wound on o'er hill and plain, upon the track
Their leader showed. No longer crouched and bent,
He rode erect, alert, not sinister
And threatening, but still with air of power
And stern authority. At earliest gleam
Of dawn, they saw the many-towered hill
Of Chitorgarh, like some huge battleship,
That ploughs its way majestic o'er the plain,
And at its base the watchfires of the foe
Shone twinkling like the flames of silver light
The good ship shoulders from the wave and leaves
Behind in broadening wake.

With cautious step
They reached unseen a small acclivity,

That overlooked the eastern ramp and gate.
When stayed their steeds, the ladies woke to find
The troop had halted clustered in the wood,
The horses grazing, while the soldiers snatched
A hasty meal. And womanly their care
Was first to rearrange their dress and hair,
Disordered by the ride. Fair Ketu Bai
Then pushed aside the branches that o'erhung
The litter, looked upon the dawning world,
And found a new world dawned for her, new sky,
New earth, and such a glorious sun as filled
Her soul with light, and like a magnet, drew
Her maiden heart from out her maiden breast.

The hero on his steed stood statuesque
Upon the hill's brow, screened from the foe
By riven rock of granite. Red the dawn
Shone flame-like on the burnished helm and plume,
The steel chain-armour, and the panther skin
That covered steed and saddle. Like a tongue
Of fire, the long two-handed Rajput sword
Hung from the rider's waist. The dark-grey steed
Blew wide his nostril, tossed his bending crest,
As though he smelt the battle from afar.
But Ketu's eyes beheld nor steed nor arms.
She saw alone the man magnificent,
The hero, king of men. The shapely limbs,

The flowing lines of swelling muscle 'neath
 The rings of steel, the narrow waist, the chest
 Like cavern vast girt round with iron bands,
 The face,—the girl put up her hand to stop
 The tremour in her breast,—the forehead low
 And broad, the even brows, the steady eyes
 That watched the foes' long lines with piercing gaze,
 The nose aggressive, curved like eagle's beak,
 The full and firm-set lips, the well-trimmed beard.
 Was this the foul and loathly sensualist
 Of yester eve? or was it some bright god
 Of arms and battle, flown from heavenly spheres
 To dazzle eyes of mortal men below?
 The girl's whole soul went out in worship, while
 She breathed love's incense, half intoxicate.

The minstrel's voice drew her to earth again,
 "There stands our princely leader." "Thou hast
 not,"

The princess whispered quick, "revealed aught
 Of our identity?" He shook his head.
 "Your Highness' least command I have obeyed.
 But when the mood is passed, a heavy veil
 Of dense oblivion weighs upon his brain.
 He naught remembers." "Most convenient veil,"
 Rohet here interrupted with a sneer,
 "To save him from repentance for past sin,

Or is it that he chooses to forget ! ”

“ Rohet, be still ! ” the princess ordered. “ What
Hast told him of our presence with the troop ? ”

“ The simple truth. Two ladies of Chitor
Returning from a pious pilgrimage,
And scarce escaped with life from Moslem Turk,
With loss of all their guard, have sought his aid,
And beg his escort back to Chitorgarh.”

“ How near is simple truth to simple lie,”
Rohet in secret thought.

The leader turned
And rode toward them, waving with his hand
Salute most courtly. “ Ladies, I have learned
From Hari Raj, my minstrel, that ye crave
My escort to Chitor.” His voice was rich
And deep. The princess, through her veil, looked
keen

And long, but in the bold brown eyes she saw
No slightest sign that they remembered aught
Of past disgrace. “ ’Tis true,” she said, “ and if
The noble Rao will aid our great distress,
Our heartfelt thanks are his.” “ No easy task,”
The chief replied, “ for here ye cannot stay.
Within the hour these Moslem wolves, when we
Have singed their pelts, will take this route in flight
To Delhi and the east. And if ye ride

With us ye'll find our pace as gentle as
The whirlwind blast." "Our steeds are swift, and we
E'er now have ridden where few men have cared
To follow," Ketu cried, and in her breast
Arose a yearning keen to stir this man
Out of his calm superiority,
By some wild deed to force him to admire
Her skill or courage.

Slowly smiled the Rao
At Ketu's boasting. "Honoured shall we feel,
If ye will deign to yield the foremost place
For one day only to the stronger sex."
Poor Ketu reddened underneath her veil,
So easily he put aside her vaunt.
No idle one, howe'er. The girl could ride
The fiercest steed as well as any man.
The saddle-tree her cradle as a child,
She learned to ride as others learn to walk,
And oft had followed to the shouting hunt
Her joyous sire, and e'en had broken lance
Upon the bristled crest of charging boar.

X

THE CHARGE

The leader called his captains and set forth
The plan of battle. "Yonder river-bed
Will hide our march e'en to their very tents.
Ere break of day the Moslem cry to prayer
Will throw the fools upon their knees to pray
To their false prophet. At a given word
Our troop divides, to charge on either side
And roll their long lines up from end to end
Like sheets of parchment. Few indeed our force,
But at the fighting point we shall o'erpower
By weight of numbers. Slay each man his five !
The rest will flee. Your guerdon shall be great.
Ye've fought with me ere now 'gainst greater odds,
And ever have I led to victory.
Thou, Gordhan, lead the southern charge ! The north
Is led by Dalpat. I, against my wont,
Will ride in rear with chosen troopers ten,
To wait upon their general, Khizar Khan.
Methinks he's lived too long. Our circling wings
Will sweep around the city wall and meet
Beside the western gate. The ladies ride
Behind me close." "No place so safe, not e'en

The Castle Ranthambor," a trooper cried.

The ladies mounted. Soon the troop moved on
In silent column to the river-bed.
The spirit of the coming battle breathed
On men and steeds. Forgotten was the march,
The hunger, thirst, and toil. The men's eyes shone
As bright as their keen swords. The horses trod
With brisker hoofs and lightly toyed their bits.

The princess took her place behind the chief
The twisted spear still hung at saddle-bow,
A grim reminder of the shameful past.
But as the girl advanced, her mantle fell
As if by chance, and hid the polished steel.
Did she forgive, or was she willing to
Forget? Then why not loose the cord and drop
The useless spear?

A ditch, four paces wide,
Delayed the troop. The leader drew his rein,
And watched his men ride fetlock-deep in mire.
Then from bravado or the wish to test
His horse's mettle, leaped the steed across.
At once fair Ketu's Arab flew in air
As if on wings, and landed one long stride
Beyond the dark-grey hoofs. The leader smiled,
And Ketu's happy heart sang loud in glee,
"He saw me and approved." "Bravo!" he said,

“The long march has not tamed thine Arab steed.”

“He’s desert born,” the girl replied, “and naught
But death can quench his heart of fire.” ’Twas strange.
Not half an hour had passed since her new world
Had dawned. To her it seemed a twelvemonth long
Of joy divine.

But see ! the red light yields
To gold. The earth is hushed, as in high hall
Of audience, courtiers wait in silence deep
The advent of their king. A cry rings out,
The weird muezzin from the hairy throats
Of white-robed priests. “Our God is God alone,
Muhammad is his prophet. Worship, all
Ye faithful !” Swift as hovering hawks, who close
Their wings and fall upon their prey, the troop
Leapt from the river-bed. On either side
Five hundred horsemen formed in glittering lines.
The leader thundered, “Charge !” and at the word,
The storm-wave burst. The thudding of the hoofs
Was drowned by clamour, oaths and yells of fear.
Before the foe, surprised, could arm or flee,
The wave swept o’er them, leaving in its wake
A bloody lane of dead and dying men.

The Bundi chief, the ladies close behind,
Followed the northern charge. The furious pace,
The screams of anguish, clash of arms, the soft

And sickening sound of sabres shearing through
The quivering flesh, the sight and smell of blood,
All filled the terror-stricken women's hearts
With horror indescribable. They fell
Upon their horses' necks and clutched the manes,
And closed their eyes and feebly uttered prayers,
Their senses nigh to fainting. Wailed Rohet,
"I fall, my queen." Like icy stream, the voice
Of woe strung taut the nobler woman's nerve.
"To fall is death to body or to soul !
Thou hast thy dagger. Use it ere thou risk
Thine honour dear !" The cruel words awoke
The handmaid's courage, daunted not subdued.
And thereupon both women rode erect,
With outward show of reckless bravery,
Howe'er their bosoms fluttered 'neath their veils.

By this the charge had reached the northern bend,
Where sweeps the hill to westward and to south.
The fury of the onset o'er, the men
Still rode at headlong gallop. Spears and swords
Were red to gauntlet grip. The fleeing foe
Were ridden over, trampled, stabbed, and slashed.
No time to form in rallying line or square.
And here and there a random arrow struck
A trooper. Wide he flung his arms and fell.
His comrades heeded not. No time for aid

To stricken friend. "To fall is death ! Delay
Will ruin all. Ride on and strike and slay !
The joy of dying with a warrior's death
Is scarcely less than rapture of the strife."

Some thirty yards behind the charging troop,
The Bundi chief rode with his little band.
The double-edged, double-handed sword
He wielded in one mighty hand as light
As staff of cane. In the red lane he rode
The foes were few, but woe to them if they
E'er came within the reach of that long arm
And sword. Ne'er looking back, he ever chose
The smoother way. The princess, seeing this,
Cried to herself, "He thinks of me," and then
Within her heart, a little bird trilled forth
A song of joy and love. The golden sun
Climbed up the eastern steep. The girl had eyes
For one sun only. Never morning star
Adored with worship more devout the lord
Of day, than she adored her lord of men.
"Was ever man so kingly ?" sang the bird.
"Was ever love like mine ?" the echo came.

The charge swept round the bend, and heading south
They saw afar the city's western gate.
A fanfare loud of trumpets from the wall
Awoke the flying voices of the plain.

The gate swung back. Like cascade swift and wide,
That pent up, breaks its barrier down, and falls
From beetling rock in cataract of spray,
The men of Chitorgarh dashed down their hill,
And took the foe in rear. The Moslems fled
In utter rout, while swift upon their heels,
The vengeful Rajput rode with thirsty spear,
That never wearied of its draught of life.

XI

THE RESCUE

The chieftain checked his steed. "There are your
friends

And there your journey's end. The flying foe
No further menace give. Young Hari Raj,"—
The bard had ridden at his leader's side—
"With troopers twain, will guard ye to the gate.
My work is yet to do. And so farewell!"
He bowed and rode towards a gentle rise,
Where stood a gorgeous tent of cloth of gold
And silken hangings, shining in the sun

Like some gay palace fetched from fairy land.
The princess reined her steed. The sun still poured
His golden light o'er hill and wood and field.
But in her eyes the world was growing dark.
Her sun had set. And as she stayed in doubt,
A troop of Moslem horse, till then unseen,
Rode from a knoll between her and the gate.
Her wistful eyes looked up to where her chief
Climbed slowly to the tent. The little bird
Sang, "Follow, follow, follow!" in her breast.
At once without a word she loosed her rein,
And galloped up the hill, Rohet, the bard,
And grumbling troopers toiling in her wake.

He saw her not. His eyes were fixed intent
Upon his quarry with the unwinking gaze
Of questing lion when he sights his prey.
Some half a score of soldiers gave the alarm,
And ran at him with buckler, sword, and spear.
He rode them down, and roaring, "Cut the ropes!
And drive this badger from his gilded lair!"
He took his stand beside a door, while ran his men
To do his bidding. At the moment peered
From out the silken doorway, cautious-wise,
A head that wore a turban huge, on which
A priceless ruby shone with ruddy gleam.
The great sword rose and fell. The head flew off,

As head of poppy from a schoolboy's stick,
And rolled for twenty paces down the hill.
“'Tis Khizar Khan himself,” the chieftain cried,
“I know him by the ruby which he stole
From Bando Rao, my sire.”

The princess paused,
And drew aside her steed. A faintness stole
Upon her. “Always blood and blood in streams.”
She shut her eyes, but still the river flowed.
“Was heroism naught but shedding blood?”
The minstrel touched her bridle. “Come away !
This is no place for women.” As he spoke,
The tent, in hills of bellying canvas, fell
To earth. From underneath a babel rose
Of men and women tangled in the folds.
And up and down the troopers rode like fiends
Who spear the damned around a yelling hell,
And slew and slew and spared not. “Come away !”

But as they turned, the troop they marked erewhile,
In furious gallop, topped the rising knoll,
All eager to avenge their leader's death.
A hand seemed clutching at the princess' throat.
She gasped for breath and shrieked, “Beware ! my
lord,
Beware !” The chieftain swung his steed to face

The rushing peril. At the instant snapped
A tightened rope with noise like crack of whip.
A long snake flew in coils and quivering wrapped
In sinuous rings about the charger's legs,
And brought him to the earth. At once the foe
Surrounded struggling man and horse, like dogs
Who do to death a dying boar. In vain
The chieftain strove to rise. A dozen arms
Were hacking at his life.

What cry is this,

The vicious snarl of tigress when she leaps
Before her wounded whelp? Can cry so fierce
E'er issue from sweet lips of gentle mould?
The princess heard but did not recognise
Her own wild voice. Her eyes were blazing stars,
Her veil thrown back, her raven hair all loose,
She looked the angel of destruction dire,
As like a thunderbolt, her Arab struck
The foremost foeman. Down went man and horse.
The Arab reared and plunged. The girl ne'er moved
An inch, but sat her saddle firm as rock,
And once again she flung the steed in charge.

The foe were checked. The giant on the ground
Found space to breathe, and instantly he leaped
Upon his feet, the long sword in his hand.

He swept the blade in broadening circle round.
The foe surged back. The hero forward strode
To where the princess curbed her plunging steed.
He seized the bridle, cleared his eyes of blood,
Then gazed with wonder that each moment grew,
Upon the loveliest sight in this our world,
A woman's perfect face, the eyes alight
With love and pity. "Thanks, all thanks, my queen
The life thou gavest is for ever thine
To hold or cast away, and with my life
My heart."

Her face grew rosy as the dawn.
She felt upborne upon a wondrous cloud
Of light and love, to realms of wildering bliss.
And when Rohet and Hari Raj o'ertook
Her galloping across the level plain,
Her rein hung loose, and fixed in ecstasy,
Her eyes saw things to them invisible.

The chieftain followed with a longing eye
The horses heading for the distant gate,
Then like a skilful master-workman turned
Again to his stern task of slaughter fell.

The wave of war had ebbed and now the mead
Was empty save for wreckage of the slain,
And groups of tussling vultures standing round

The heaps of dead, and flights of noisy crows,
And here and there a jackal slinking by,
Red-lipped and hungry-eyed. The dead men moved
In jerks grotesque of arms and legs, as if
In protest petulant that birds obscene
Should treat with vile familiarity
What once had warriors been, brimful of life
And courage high, and strength and comeliness.

The princess, with the callousness of love,
Saw nothing save her vision of delight,
Heard nothing save the yearning of a voice,
“ And with my life, my heart.” “ He loves me, loves
Me only,” sang her soul, with joy so great
It felt almost like pain.

XII

MARVELS OF THE WILDERNESS

They reached the road
That rises zigzag to the frowning gate,
And here a voice behind them called, “ My queen,
Your Highness, prithee, deign to check thy steed ! ”

The princess drew her rein. The sudden fall
From heaven to earth awoke her, made her blink
Her wondering eyes, scarce knowing where she stood.
'Twas Daulat Singh, who urged a shambling horse
Into a staggering trot, and rode almost
At footpace to the princess' side. Behind,
Four weary troopers came on steeds, whose heads
Sunk low, and hollow sides and drooping tails
Showed that the riders had not spared the spur.
A joyous cry burst from the princess' lips.
"Old Daulat Singh, my captain of the guard !
The hero, who, in service of his queen,
Was ready aye to throw his life away,
Right glad am I to see thee, who was mourned
As one already dead."

The captain smiled,
"In faith, my soul and body have so long
Been bound together close in partnership,
It is not easy, nay, nor always safe,
To try and disunite them." "Did the troop
We sent, arrive in time to give thee aid?"
"And if they had not, never more, I ween,
Would Chitorgarh have seen old Daulat ride
Beneath her ancient walls. Behind a ramp
Of man and horseflesh, held we well our own,
Until they left their beasts and climbed above,

And shot us down with arrows. Four good men
We lost, when came your troop in sight and turned
The tables. Faith, the Moslem lifted hoof
As swift as barren does. Though truth to tell,
Prevailed we on a few to stay and give
A dole to us in kindly charity."

He raised a hand as lean as eagle's claw,
On which a dozen golden rings, all set
With gems, flashed green and red and dazzling white.
The princess also noted heavy bags
The troopers bore at saddle bow and croup.
"Our steeds have changed their parentage. 'Tis strange
What marvels happen in the wilderness.
Though jaded now to death, yet give them rest,
To-morrow thou wilt scarcely find their peers
In all the Rana's stables."

"Why this haste?"

The princess asked. "The foemen were in flight.
Thou and thy men had fought the weary day.
Thou knewest we were safe." Replied the chief,
"For fifty years, the wind of war has been
To me the breath of life, my meat and drink,
And when the huntsman halloos to the chase,
Old hounds care not to stretch themselves and sleep.
We heard the Rao would strike before sunrise.

All night we rode upon a devious track.
The fool, our guide, had not the forest lore
That makes a wizard of the Bundi chief.
Our horses almost foundered, we nigh dead,
Our troop arrived at dawn, and, as the charge
Rushed by, struck in with our last gallop weak
And tottering. I thought each stride would bring
My brute to earth and a long Moslem knife
Across my throat."

XIII

LOVE'S MAGIC

As thus they talked, they climbed
The zigzag path and reached the heavy gate.
"One word in parting," then the princess cried,
"And lay it well to heart as soldier should !
In strict obedience to my sire's command,
I, with Rohet my handmaid, guarded aye
By trusty Daulat Singh, have ridden swift
To shrine of Parvati on Lamia hill.
There offered prayers for safety of the realm,
And straight returned. Upon the way our guard

Held back pursuit of Moslem horse, while we
Escaped and reached the fortress gate, to find
The foe in rout before the Bundi charge.
When called on for report, this is the tale
My trusty captain tells my worthy sire."

"Your Highness hath a wondrous memory."
"Not half so wondrous as thy loyalty
To ladies in distress." Old Daulat frowned,
"Against all discipline!" The princess cried,
"And what has soldiers' discipline to do
With ladies fair? We thank thee from our hearts
For service past and service yet to do.
And now farewell! I die of weariness.
Rohet!" she called.

Rohet was far behind.

Her steed was footsore and the rider seemed
Nigh dropping with fatigue. The minstrel held
Her bridle, while his other hand reposed
Upon the croup in readiness to aid,
In case she fell. Their heads were very close.
"Rohet!" 'Twas strange how swift the princess' voice
Electrified both man and maid and steed.
"My body faints with weariness," Rohet
Said, hanging low her head. "But not thy tongue,"
The princess quick rejoined. Her keen eyes dwelt

Awhile upon the bent and veiled form,
Then turned towards the minstrel ; but the bard,
Discreet beyond his age, had disappeared.

They reached the palace. Ketu sent a slave
To warn the Rana of his child's return.
Then climbed the girls the lofty stair that led
To Ketu's chamber, threw aside their veils,
And ate the food prepared. The servants gone,
And they alone at last, the princess placed
Her hands upon the shoulders of her maid,
Looked long at blushing face and downcast eyes,
And said, " I know thy secret, little one."
Rohet swung round to put her face in shade,
And bring her mistress into light, and then
She quickly raised her eyes with steady gaze.
'Twas now the princess' turn. The colour surged
O'er brow and cheek to deepest red, but still
She never lowered her eyes. " And I know thine,"
The maiden whispered. Cried the princess, " True !
I love him with the strength of all my soul,
Nor care I if the wide world knows." Her eyes
Shone radiant with the pride of love.

Rohet,
With smile of mischief, said, " The twisted spear !"
The girl turned savagely upon her. " How
Dar'st thou adjudge the noblest man on earth ?

We women cannot gauge a hero great
With measuring tape of our simplicity.
He stands apart. He has his failings, true.
All men are mortal. But his virtues far
Outrun his paltry sins. And more, for love
Of me, my hero shall renounce the fault
That tarnishes his brightness, will emerge
A perfect knight, my hero, and my love.
Come, let us sleep ! ” They laid them down, but ere
The handmaid closed her eyes, she murmured low,
“ ’Twas she who bore the insult, she who called
Him monster, beast and brute, and spoke of day
Of reckoning without an eve. This love
Has magic power. Heigh-ho ! ’Tis very sweet ! ”

XIV

THE KING AND THE PRINCESS

All day the women slept in their high bower.
Below, the city hummed with mirth and joy,
At victory complete o’er infidel.
The Bundi troopers—now, alas ! the tale

Was but seven hundred men—were fêted with
The best of food and wine, each man like prince
Of high renown. Outside the city wall,
The Rana's horsemen pressed the flying foe,
Exacting bounteous toll of blood and life.

At set of sun, the Rana visited
His daughter fair. "My child, I thank the gods
Who brought thee back through perils manifold
To thy fond father's arms." "My sire beloved!
No daughter of the royal house would quail
At danger, howsoever great and near,
To save her people." "True," the king replied,
"No chick of mine has ever wanted pluck.
Thy words remind me of the prophecy
Of ancient Har Bilas, my reverend seer.
He saw in nightly dream, a danger great
That hung o'er Chitorgarh, and like a bolt
From cloudless sky, within three days, the foe
Held us in siege. But soon the danger great
Would be averted, if a royal maid
Should pray to Parvati in Lamia's shrine.
I sent thee straight, and lo! the Bundi Rao
Strikes in and drives the foe like wheaten chaff.
'Tis wonderful. The holiness of saint
He joins to mystic wisdom of the sage,
And all by vigil, fast, and prayer. 'Tis meet

I give him due reward. But not for this
Came I to see thee, pretty one. The Rao
Has done us service great. Within the hour
We hold a full durbar, to honour, thank,
And welcome him. Should he again demand
Thy hand as guerdon for the deed he wrought,
What answer shall I give ? ”

The girl replied,

“ My sire has passed his royal word that I
Should see, and speak to, and myself adjudge
Each suitor to my hand.” Her father smiled,
“ Behind thy lattice thou art free to look
Until thy dear eyes ache, but as for speech,
No promise did I make. ’Tis straight against
Our ancient custom, and withal averse
To every rule of modesty that thou,
A maiden, shouldst have speech and converse with
A man before he calls thee wedded wife.”
“ And if I do not speak, then how can I
Adjudge ? Rememberest thou the ancient priest,
The Frankish devotee from foreign lands ?
A year ago he sojourned at thy court.
He told me many marvels of the west,
And this among them, that the women there
Have fullest liberty to choose, each maid
The man she wished to wed.”

The great king frowned,
“Not liberty, but licence, shameless, gross,
Abhorred! This pestilent priest, who hath abused
Our hospitality to sow a seed
Of poisoned doctrine in thy maiden mind,
Where dwells the rogue? A dozen score of stripes
Methinks should cure—” “He’s cured already,” sighed
The girl. “His kind enjoyeth pain and woe.
The rumour goes he found his paradise
In Delhi from a Moslem sword. But still
There was a grain of wisdom in his words.
Are we poor women slaves for sale, like sheep
Or goats or cattle dumb?” “Not dumb, I’ll swear,”
The Rana muttered in his beard. “Are we
To have no choice of him, our master, through
The years to come till death dissevers all?
So little is the thing I ask, one hour
Of converse through the latticed screen, and thou,
My royal sire, hast ta’en thy sacred oath.”
“Peace, peace! for fathomless I know the well
Of woman’s words.”

The king then mused awhile.

“One hour of converse! Strange what maggots grow
In women’s minds. No matter! If the Rao
Demand her hand, the jade must marry him,
Or else red war and ravage far and wide.

No spurless cockerel this our Bundi chief.”
On this he pulled his daughter’s ear, and cried,
“ I’ll give thee then thy wish, but what my lords
And their fair dames will say I dare not think.”
“ Why should they know ? ” said Ketu merrily.
“ A timely whisper when the minstrels sing
Will breed no echo.” Swift she threw her arms
About her father’s neck and kissed him thrice,
Then shook a warning finger, as the king
Strode forth to meet his chiefs in council hall
Of high durbar.

XV

A WEDDING GIFT

The torches flamed, and loud
The drums and trumpets sounded in salute,
When with slow step and regal mien, the king
Advanced and took his seat to loud acclaim
Of, “ Peace to thee, great Monarch, Lord of Lords ! ”
And first he marked old Har Bilas who cringed
With body bent beside a pillar tall,
And called him, “ Reverend Sir, thy prophecy

In every detail is fulfilled. Thou art
The saviour of Chitor, and I most fortunate
To count among my household one so wise
And good. My treasurer has word received
To pay one hundred golden pieces, slight
Return for vigil, fast, and ceaseless prayer.
We trust Your Holiness will deign accept
This paltry gift as first-fruit, token small
Of royal gratitude." The priest's eyes shone
With greed of gain, as bowing low he left
The hall with miser's rapid step who fears
The least delay will rob him of his prize.

The princess from her lattice saw and heard
What passed between her father and the priest.
And, "Quick, Rohet," she cried, "I pray thee run
And tell the reverend seer, last night I dreamed
A dream in which I saw him render back
My necklace. Should he venture to refuse,
Then softly hint that I as well as he
Can tell the future, and my prophecies
Are oft fulfilled. The rogue has served our turn,
But double guerdon for a single lie
Is payment more than gratitude demands."

Rohet ran lightly, soon returned, and waved
The pearls in triumph. "'Twas like drawing teeth,"

She gaily laughed, "or heart's blood drop by drop."
The princess took the necklace, threw it o'er
Her handmaid's head, and whispered, "Take it, sweet !
A wedding gift from one who loves thee dear.
I fear thou'rt somewhat fickle. What saidst thou,
Scarce ten days past, if memory serves me right,
'That shame would kill thee, if thou wert required
To judge a man and choose a future spouse?
I've heard no rumour yet of thy demise.
In truth love's flower is plant of rapid growth."
The maiden murmured joyful thanks and kissed
Her mistress' hand, then slily whispered low,
"Ten days are more than one," and watched with glee
The flame fly over Ketu's lovely face.

XVI

THE DURBAR

Again the trumpets shrilled, the roll of drums
Burst forth in deafening roar, the heralds called
The Bundi titles with stentorian voice.
The assembly rose. The king himself advanced

To meet the stately prince, who with his chiefs,
In slow procession paced along the hall.
Resplendent in his silken robes, with pearls
About his neck, the ruby flashing fire
From jewelled plume and aigrette o'er his brow,
He seemed at every point a cavalier
Of noblest breeding, matchless courtesy.
The princess caught her breath. Her woman's eye
Marked every movement of her heart's desire.
Was this refined and polished gentleman
The blood-stained lord of battle she had seen
Some few hours past, who rode the field of war
A god of carnage, dealing death and doom?
His long, straight sword a page behind him bore.
Apart from this no sign was there to show
The warrior stern.

 The king embraced his guest,
Then placed him on the seat of honour close
Beside the throne. When silence reigned in hall,
The monarch cried, "Great Prince, we offer thanks
The heartiest, for aid most promptly given.
Long have I lived a life of stress and storm,
Yet never yet have seen a charge so well
Conceived, so boldly carried out. Though young
In years, I ween thou'rt old in strategy
And use of arms. We heard in brief the tale

Of how thou didst regain thy father's throne,
And warm our bosoms glowed when sang thy bard
Of Hara hero and the overthrow
Of Moslem infidel. Thy path is strewn
With flowers of fame. We pray it lead thee on
To world-wide glory and a lofty seat
With the eternal gods."

The Rao replied,

"I came at summons of my overlord.
What could I else? 'Twere lasting shame if I
Had sheathed my sword when the barbarian foe
Laid siege to this fair city, dear to all
The princely tribes of royal Rajasthan."

At signal given, the dancing girls advanced,
And swaying with an undulating grace
They sang in glory of the Bundi chief,
While beat the drums in time to song and dance,
And soft citaras twanged a jingling tune.
The princess in vexation cried, "An end
To our eavesdropping! Strange that men can ne'er
Transact affairs of state without the aid
Of dancing girls and drums and tinkling things.
The stronger sex forsooth! In brains and sense
The woman leads, whate'er the man may say."
But still her eyes at chink of lattice small

Watched tireless, and her ears were strained to catch
The lowest whisper of the seated chiefs.

The Rana leaned towards the Rao. "I hear,
Friend Rao, that thou thyself did'st hew the head
Of Khizar Khan, and in the *melée* fierce
Around his tent, they bore thee to the earth.
I trust thou hast not taken serious wound."
"A scratch or two, and bruises something more,"
The Rao rejoined. "Though truth to say, my case
Was somewhat perilous. My armour good
And she, my guardian angel, saved the life
That but for them was forfeit to the gods."

"We are thy debtor in a grievous sum,"
The Rana said, "and great would be our joy
Could we prevail on thee to take a gift,
Some small memento of our gratitude.
My daughter——" Swift the Rao took up the
theme,

"The privilege of aiding thee, O king,
Is recompense sufficient for myself,
Whom thou hast honoured with the name of friend.
And though, howe'er unmeet, I dare aspire
To union with great Bappa's royal house,
I will not press my suit with undue haste,
Nor take advantage of a paltry deed,

To ask in recompense a maiden's hand,
Perchance unwilling given."

Whispered low

The Rana to himself, "No suitor this
To waste and languish with the fires of love.
The man is cold as ice. The word I threw,
As blade of grass to test how blew the wind,
And lo, instead of breeze, a deadly calm!"
Then turning to his guest, he raised his voice,
And cried, "In saving us from danger great
Thou hast increased our debt of gratitude
To vast dimensions. That same gallant charge
At once delivered Chitorgarh and saved
Her princess, who from pious pilgrimage
Returning, found the way was open and
The leaguer raised."

The Rao had idly watched

As man might do whose thoughts are elsewhere,
The dancers twirling slow in postures lithe,
But at the words, "princess" and "pilgrimage,"
He started, bent an eager eye upon
The king, and asked, "What colour was the steed
Her Highness rode?" The Rana raised his brows,
As in surprise, but answer made, "The girls,
My daughter and her handmaid, were content
With nothing less than my two swiftest steeds,

Buj Raj and Manika, both Arabs pure ;
The one a bay, the other chestnut-brown."
"And which one rode Her Highness?" Strange, the chief,
A moment past serene and self-possessed,
Now waited breathless for the king's reply,
And trembled visibly. "She rode the bay,"
The Rana said, and wondered at the gasp
Of joy that issued from his neighbour's lips.
"But why the question? Didst thou see my child?"
The chief restrained himself with effort great,
And spoke with outward calm. "The battle o'er,
I stood beside the general's ruined tent,
And marked two ladies riding to the gate,
And marvelled who they were that rode so bold
Through perils numberless. Rejoiced am I
Beyond all limits to have been the means
Of succouring a princess of Chitor."

Fair Ketu saw the sudden glow that passed
Upon her chieftain's face. "He asks my hand,"
She softly said, then uttered stifled cry
Of blank dismay. "He does not know 'twas I
Who saved him. Thinks some lady of Chitor
Delivered him from death. Will never dream
That woman was the princess Ketu Bai.
But then he called me queen! Rohet!" she cried,
"'Tis my belief that villain bard of thine

Has blabbed our secret to his master there.”
Rohet grew hot with anger. “Hari Raj,
The very soul of truth and loyalty,
Has never broken plighted word.” “I pray
Thy pardon for a silly doubt and gibe,”
The princess meekly said and with her hand
She smoothed the ruffled pinions of her maid.
Then to herself, “Some men are loyal to
The verge of foolishness. He called me queen.
Queen of his heart perchance !”

The Rao had paused

Awhile, as if in thought profound. At last
He raised his head with air of fixed resolve.
“I would not press a vantage, or demand
Thy daughter’s hand,” he said, “as guerdon given
For trifling service done at duty’s call,
But if Your Majesty would care to know
The dearest wish that animates this breast,
It is to wed the peerless maiden, whom
The bards call ‘Rose of Chitorgarh,’ and thus
To join our houses in strong bonds of love
And kinship close.” His voice with vehemence
Of passion shook, and bright his brown eyes gleamed.

“Oh ho,” the Rana chuckled, “See the ice
Begins to melt ! What sudden wind has fanned
The ashes into flame ! The man’s a tower

Of strength, and Bundi 'neath his rule will form
A bulwark firm to eastward. Wrong was I
To slight his embassy." Then said aloud,
"There lives no man whom I with greater joy
Would call my son, the husband of my child.
The girl is young, but by our custom not
Too young for wedlock. Gladly do I give
Consent. The maid is thine." In lower tone,
"Alas that kings must sometimes eat their words !"

With eager voice the joyful Rao exclaimed,
"Great King, I thank thee from my soul. The gift
Outweighs my paltry service as this rock
Of Chitorgarh outweighs a pebble cast
By idle boys. One more request is mine,
Which granted, I will call no living man
My equal in the rapture of delight.
To-morrow let the wedding rites begin !"

The Rana smiled, "An eager lover thou,
And gladly would I grant the wished-for boon,
But that——" He hesitated, seemed perplexed,
And chose his words haphazard. "Fool am I,
A greybeard with a child. Thou knowest how fond
Old men can be, and women with their wiles
Could lure a saint. I promised Ketu Bai—

The girl has heard some foolish doctrine that
A woman has the right to pick and choose
The man she'll wed. I passed my word—
I fear I near my dotage—that the girl
Should see and speak to and herself adjudge
Each suitor for her hand.”

At first the Rao
Had listened to the Rana's wandering speech
With mute surprise, that Mewar's haughty king
Could stoop to sanction breach of etiquette.
Anon a secret light appeared to dawn
Upon his inner sense. “ My noble queen
Desires avowal from her lover's lips
Of the wild passion that illumed his face
When she had brought him back from death to life.
For me and me alone she begged her sire.”
He raised himself as if his heaving chest
Could scarce contain the swelling of his heart.
“ The princess hath a wisdom far beyond
The custom of her sex. When woman stakes
Her all upon the throw, her claim is just
To see the game is well and fairly played.
And I am ever ready to obey
Whate'er Her Highness bids.”

The Rana gave
A sigh of huge relief. “ The danger's past,

Thank God ! for had he whisper breathed against
My Ketu's modesty, or e'en declined
The proffered interview, my temper, ne'er
So cool as age should warrant, would have roused
A fire to burn the Rao and all his towers
To ashes fine." Then to the chief he said,
" I thank thee in my daughter Ketu's name
For yielding to request most strange, against
All Rajput custom old. No need to set
The gossips talking ! When the feast is o'er,
We too will take the air in garden cool,
And I will lead thee to an upper room
Where we may speak in greater privacy
Of state affairs." He rose and perfume threw
Upon his guest's broad shoulders, gave him *pan* *
As sign of friendship, placed a garland made
Of golden thread upon the chieftain's neck,
Then led him forth to where the feast was spread.

The princess sighed, " The Rao all eagerness,
My sire apologetic ! What can be
The fate in store for little Ketu Bai ?
I'd risk my eyes to know." Rohet could give
No comfort to her mistress. She herself
Was blushing to the tips of her small ears.
By chance a rosebud from the flowers she held,

* Betel-nut, always given at the end of a durbar.

Had fallen on a youth who picked it up
And hid it in his breast. By chance, or could
It be design? And why did he not raise
His eyes to mark what hand had thrown the flower?

XVII

THE STRAIGHTENING OF THE SPEAR

'Twas nearing midnight, ere the revelry
Of chieftains and retainers banqueting
Had sunk to sleepy monotone that told
Of happiness complete and earthly wants
Full satisfied. The princess paced the room
Of private audience with restless steps.
"Ro het," she cried, "My father sends me word
That my desire is granted and the Rao
Will come ere midnight to this very room,
Where I, with thee at hand as sprite that guards
Propriety, can speak to and adjudge
The noble chief as suitor for my hand.
Know this, my little sprite, thou'rt deaf and dumb
And wholly blind, and in that corner far

Thou sittest face to wall, until I give
Thee leave to take again thy faculties.
Heigh-ho ! I've longed and plotted all for this,
And now the time has come, I feel oppressed
With terror. How can I, a simple girl,
Presume to judge in his meridian
The sun of chivalry ? Far otherwise !
'Tis he will be the arbiter to take
Or leave the heart that beats alone for him."

She threw the window open, cooled her brow,
And gazed upon the myriad twinkling stars,
Then, " Will they ne'er have done ? In this we yield
Right willingly the palm. In food and drink
And feast and revelry, the man's our lord
And master absolute."

Her quick ear caught

A sound that sent the hot blood racing through
Her veins,—a heavy step upon the stair.
The curtain lifted and her prince of men
Strode slowly in and stood erect beneath
The lamp that swung o'erhead. He looked towards
The jewelled screen that ran across the room,
With eyes that seemed to pierce the darkness where
The princess sat and blushed in trembling joy,
For in those eyes she read devotion pure,

And reverence, and such a wealth of love
As only strong men feel.

“My queen,” he said—

His voice so deep and rich, was like a god’s—

“When thou didst give me back a worthless life,

And first I saw the wonder of thy face,

It was as if the heavens oped and I

Beheld a miracle. I ne’er had dreamed

That woman’s face could be so beautiful.”

Rohet, who in her distant corner sat,

Obedient, yet girl-like, with both hands

Like shells behind her ears, here shook her head.

“The man forgets that woman ever flies

Pursuit too ardent. Let him cool his zeal,

And she will come to hand like well-trained hawk.”

Her thought was near the truth. The princess spoke

In tones of studied coldness. She alone

Could know the effort needed to control

The heart that longed to throw away reserve,

And give itself a captive to the hand

It loved so well. “The motion of my steed

Displaced my veil. ’Twas merest accident.

And pity for a warrior in distress

Impelled me hasten to thy aid, right glad

To render service to the generous chief

Who had escorted us to Chitorgarh.”

A look of pain had crossed the chieftain's brow
At words so cold and formal, then again
His deep voice broke the silence. "Mad was I
To think that I had seen the glow of love
Upon thy face, my queen, or that the flame
That sudden burned my heart and soul, could light
So soon a spark within thy virgin breast.
But love may come with touch of plighted hands,
And by our custom old the woman knows
No lover till her husband comes to woo,
And therefore in accord with ordinance
Of our forefathers, did I beg thy sire
To grant thy hand to me as boon of price
Inestimable."

Quick the girl rejoined,
Though still in accents cool as driven snow,
"Your Highness fell methinks too suddenly
In love with her who saved thee, yet would wed
The princess Ketu Bai. How didst thou know
The two were one? And if thou didst not know,
Then thou wert willing to make offer of
Thy hand without thy heart. The two, I ween,
Should go together, if the lover's true."

A tremour shook the prince's rolling voice.
"The taunt is all unworthy of my queen."
["Take care, my little fisher," thought Rohet,

And do not pull too tight the slender line."]

"I ne'er could hope a princess of Chitor
Had honoured my poor escort, saved my life,
And deigned to show the pity on her face
To one unworthy of her least regard.
But deemed it was a lady, passing fair,
The scion of some noble house, who held
My heart in bondage. Therefore, at the first
I let my suit for thee stand idle, till
Thy father spoke of pilgrimage his child
Had made, and safe return this very morn,
And when I learned the colour of the steed
Your Highness rode, an Arab bay, I knew
The princess and my guardian angel both
Were one and one alone, my love, my queen
The Rana said that he had promise made
That thou, his daughter, shouldst adjudge
Each suitor for thy hand. And though against
Our hoary custom, yet thought I, my love
Desires avowal from her lover's lips,
And so I came, in halting speech have made
Confession of the passion that devours
My soul and sense, and now I wait reply."

The noble figure 'neath the lamp's full glare,
The arms outstretched in pleading, eyes that strove
To pierce the barrier of the jewelled screen,

And voice of tender yearning, all conjoined
To break the feeble wall of cold restraint
The princess tried to raise as last defence
To her beleaguered heart. She left her couch
And took a forward step in act to make
Complete surrender to the welcome foe,
When gently coughed Rohet, as if to warn,
And slightly raised a round and twisted thing
That rattled on the floor. The girl glanced back,
And in a moment all the scene was changed.
Her king of men was gone, and in his place
She saw again the strange contorted form,
The open mouth of imbecile, the flies—
She shuddered, hid her face between her hands.
This also passed, and then once more she heard
The frenzied roar, and saw the blood-shot eyes,
And felt the insult of a loathéd touch.

Her pride of birth asserted mastery
O'er nature frail. She clenched her little hands,
Drew backward to the couch, and proudly stood
Her head in air. The time had come, she knew,
Her only chance of future happiness,
To bargain for her hand when she was free,
And he a suppliant. Would he renounce
His treasured secret sin for love of her?
“If not,” her lips shut tight, “she would not wed

A two-form being, beast and man, e'en though
The man was half a god."

"I wait reply!"

The deep voice thrilled her, but with stern control
She answered still in cool and measured tone.

"Your Highness, dost thou call to mind the time
We joined thy escort near the ancient well?"

A heavy shadow crossed the chieftain's face,
And for an instant in his eyes there gleamed
The sullen brooding look of him who led
The troop all night through forest pathways dark.
He spoke with voice no longer firm and full.

"I am the victim of a malady,
Which oft attacks me sleeping, so that I
Am robbed of memory for many hours.
At midnight when we called our halt, the bard
Made known Your Highness' presence with the troop,
But I can naught remember when or where
My princess first did grace our little band."

The girl took up the twisted spear, and then
For the first time the merry twinkle bright
Of girlish days lit up her tearful eyes.

"I hear from travellers in distant lands,
The people of the west have customs strange,
And this among them, that the suitor gives
A ring as sign of wedlock to his bride,

And should Your Highness wish to copy rites,
Howe'er uncouth, of other climes, here is
A wedding ring, of generous size I trow,
But still a ring well fitted to enthrall
A leash of brides." She oped a panel wide
Within the screen, and passed the twisted spear
To him who stood bewildered at her words.
Then tried a laugh that ended in a sob.

"My child, what means this jest? A ring indeed!
But somewhat overlarge for thy slim hand."
Her laugh again was half hysterical.
"But not for my slim waist." He took the spear
And held it to the light that shone o'er head.
"My spear!" he said, "I marvel when 'twas lost.
And twisted in a double ring! What force
Gigantic could have bent the stubborn steel?"
His mind seemed groping in a labyrinth,
To find some clue his memory had dropped.
"But not for thy slim waist! A double ring!
I know one hand alone——" He dropped the spear,
And with the cry of one who unaware
Receives a mortal wound, he reeled and struck
Against a carven pillar that upheld
The palace roof. His memory like a fiend,
Was riding him to madness. All was clear
As broadest light of day, the insult dire,

The lasting degradation and the shame.
His strong hands gripped the stone that seemed to bend
And dint beneath the rigid strain. His face
Lay hidden on his arm, and all his frame
Was shaken with the tempest of remorse.

Rohet ran quickly to her mistress' side,
And put her arms about the frightened girl,
And so the trembling women stood and watched
The strong man in his hour of agony.

"Let me go to him!" Ketu whispered low,
"His grief is measureless. At such a time
All rules of etiquette are vain as air.

I cannot bear the sight of so much woe."

"No, no!" Rohet insisted. "Hold thy ground
One moment more! The victory is thine."

Anon the chieftain raised himself, though still
He felt the pillar with one nervous hand
To keep his balance sure. His head was bowed
And turned towards the door, and so he stood
A moment. Then with faltering voice he spoke,
"My queen, I know full well thou canst not e'er
Forgive the man who, viler than the beasts,
Subjected thee to hideous outrage of
His hateful touch. And in return thou didst
Take such revenge as only angels take,
And saved this worthless life. How dare I raise

My eyes in hope to gain that peerless prize,
Thy hand, princess? And now farewell! I go
Back to my life of battle, storm, and strife;
And welcome is the foeman's sword that strikes
Swift to a broken heart."

He took one stride,
And raised his hand to lift the curtain draped
About the door, when suddenly a cry,
Like wail of child who dreads the darkness, rang
Out shrill and clear. "Ah! Stay!" The chieftain paused,
Incredulous that he had heard aright.
Was this wild cry entreating, voice of her
The haughty princess of the royal line?
Again it sobbed, "Come back, my knight, my king!
I cannot live without thee. I forgive
And will forget the buried past. Come back!"
The prince turned quickly on his heel. A look
Of joy ineffable with wonder blent
Spread o'er and glorified the warrior's face,
Which when Rohet perceived, she gently laughed,
And kissed her mistress' cheek, and whispered, "Thine
The victory, sweetheart!" Then slipped away
And left the room, forgetting duty's call.

"And dost thou call me back? Wilt thou forgive?
Thou canst not live without me? Then in truth
It was the heavenly light of love that beamed

From thy dear face, when first its beauty shone
Upon the darkness of my lonely life.
I did not think a mortal e'er could feel
Such ecstasy of soul. Two gifts, her heart,
My life ! And can I nothing do in proof
Of gratitude ?" He seized the twisted spear,
With preternatural force his sinewy hands
Unwound the tempered steel, then 'neath his feet
He stamped it flat, until once more the spear
Was straight as arrow shaft. " And see," he cried,
" The twisted spear unbent and straight again !
I swear by great Narayan, God of all,
The Almighty Deity whose name I bear,
That my poor soul, contorted, twisted, bent,
And sunk in bestial vice, henceforth shall stand
Erect and straight, as this bright spear I hold,
And in the radiance of my sovereign's face,
Shall shine an emblem fair of purity."

He nearer came, and, through the jewelled screen,
The princess felt his warm breath on her cheek,
That made her girl's heart beat so loud and quick,
She thought he needs must hear. His pleading voice
Was very low, " One little word of love,
My Rose of Chitorgarh ! One word alone !"
At once poor Ketu's lake of passion burst
Its last restraint, and overflowing swept

Away upon its pent-up wave of love
All rules of custom and formality.
“I loved thee from the moment when I saw
My hero riding in the light of dawn.
A day has not yet passed, but what is time
Compared to love, whose vast immensity
Confounds all little thoughts of time and space !
My love is like an ocean without bounds.
My love is like the star-strewn realms of air,
Illimitably great. Thou art my all.
Without thee I am nothing. Strange, and still
Scarce credible, that through these weary years,
I’ve lived without the sunlight of a love
That now irradiates my inmost soul.”

The chieftain sighed. “I dare not look again
Upon my darling’s face. A spark will light
The Hara blood to fire. But let me take
My princess’ hand that I may place therein
A token of my passion and my vow !”
The panel swung ajar, and timidly
A tiny hand stole forth and trembling lay
An unfurled lily on his mighty palm.
And first he kissed it reverently, and then
He loosed the ruby flaming on his brow,
And laid it where his burning lips had touched.
“To-morrow let the priests begin their rites !

But now and here I wed thee with this gem,
My bride ! It is the Hara destiny.
With it the fortunes of my race are bound.
And giving it to thee, I trust my life
And honour to thy keeping, sweet." He kissed
The hand again. "The ruby's name—" He paused
Awhile, until she gently asked, "Its name ?
It seems to hold a hidden fire that wanes
And glows as if a spirit dwelt confined
By some strong charm beneath its darkling depths.
Its name should be a word of magic power."
He said, "We call it 'Heart of Love,' my queen."

PART II

I

OLDER BY TEN YEARS

Six months have passed since Rao Narayn Singh
Brought home his bride, the Rose of Chitorgarh.
What need to speak of mystic rites complex,
That priests alone pretend to understand ?
The exchange of wedding gifts, and all the pomp
And splendour that accompany a bride
Of ancient Chitorgarh, who, wedded, leaves
Her royal home ? When hearts, delirious
With the first draught of love's delightful wine,
Beat close in happy unison, all rites
And ceremonies are vain bubbles, which
The children blow and love to look upon,
So gaudy in their many-coloured hues,
But filled with idle breath of little fools.

Six months have passed, and lonely in her tower
That overlooks the Bundi battlements,
And range on range of rocky bush-clad hill,

Sat the young queen, her chin upon her hand,
Her large eyes far away, yet turned towards
The west where lies her childhood's home. The land
Was all empurpled by the light that fell
From a sad sun, who strove to hide his face,
Ashamed, behind a fleecy film of cloud.
Six months ! The queen seemed older by ten years.
Her features pinched and thin, her dark-rimmed eyes
Too large, and haunted with a look of pain.
And stranger still, her dress, no longer trim
With the excess of neatness women proud
And self-respectful show, was careless thrown
About her person. E'en her raven hair,
Her girlhood's pride, was loose and disarranged,
And hung in blue-black coils about her waist.

For long she sat without a movement, mused
With eyes unblinking, fixed in rigid stare
Upon the western hills. At last with sigh
Of weariness, she shivered, drew her veil,
And cried, "I wish Rohet would come. I long
To see her cheery face. Four months and more !
It seems an age since she and Hari Raj
Were married, and the minstrel took his bride
To grace his castle on the border-land.
What says her letter, ' Ere the set of sun ! '
Well, there the sun is setting ! Can it be

That all are faithless to a plighted word?"

A merry laugh came up the winding stair,
A bounding step, and lo, Rohet runs in,
And throws herself, with laughter and with tears,
Upon her mistress' neck. The women sob,
According to all women's custom when
Their joy's too great for words, and hug and kiss,
And sob again, and then each other hold
At arm's length, while they scan with look intense
The well-known features of the face beloved.

And mark how time, the hoary hypocrite,
Reveals his favouritism rank! Rohet
Stands there in bloom of perfect womanhood,
That glories in surrender to her lord.
The queen is bent and thin, and on her brow
Dark care has written one word—"Misery."

Rohet's eyes open wide. "Dear mistress mine,
What ghastly change is this? Some sickness dread
Hath laid a blighting hand upon my queen.
And thou didst send no word to me thy friend,
Who would have come with utmost speed to nurse
Thee back to life and strength. I never thought
To call my Rose unkind." Poor Ketu raised
Her languid eyes. "'Tis nothing, my Rohet.
A broken oath, a jest the men declare
Of humour exquisite. So, let us laugh."

And bravely did she try to mould her lips
Into a sunny smile. "But death to me,"
She whispered, while her body drooped and swayed,
As if its store of strength was failing fast.
Rohet caught up the fainting girl and placed
The weary head upon her bosom soft.
And like a mother with an ailing child,
She gently rocked the fragile frame, that seemed
Nigh rent in twain with agony of grief.

Then after sorrow's storm, the kindly tears
Flowed down in steady stream, and with a balm
Of healing virtue, soothed the jangled nerves.

II

A BROKEN OATH

At last a silence fell. Rohet caressed,
And with her fingers combed the tangled locks.
"My queen, I pray thee share thy grief with me.
Repression goes with brooding, and the two
Lead on to that dark land where madness rules

As king." The voice was very small and sad
That answer made. "He loves me still, Rohet.
—I could not dare to think he did not love—
And kept his oath for one long happy month.
What bliss was ours, beyond e'en seraphs' dreams
Of heavenly joy! And then the war arose.
My prince went forth to battle and returned
As ever with fresh laurels on his brow
Of victory. Yet lingered on the way
That led him to my loving arms; and when
He came, his eye was furtive and his step
Less free. I knew, at the first glance I knew,
His solemn oath was broken like a glass.
And yet I made pretence of ignorance,
And met him like a true and loving wife,
With smiles and tears of welcome, never breathed
One word of blame, one sigh to show I knew,
But used my every wile to win him back,
And first succeeded, then again he fell.
And soon I found, within the amal flower
There lived a spirit stronger than my love,
And when it called, no tender arms of mine
Could save my husband from the siren's charm.
The man whom all obeyed, it drew in chains
Of abject slavery. For days and weeks
He tried to hide his bouts of frequent sin,

And fearful pleasure. Now has callous grown,
And cares no whit to throw the thinnest veil
Before his baser self. And still no word
Of smallest blame has passed my wifely lips.
What could I else? No princess of Chitor
Can soil her tongue with railing and abuse.
We are not market-wives to storm and curse.
And if my soft caress and pleading eyes,
My every gesture of entreaty, could
Not foil the evil spirit, break the charm,
Release the fettered soul, what use is found
In stern rebuke, invective coarse, or worse,
In open wrangle 'twixt a man and wife,
The common jest of every low buffoon?
And yet he loves me. When the mood has passed,
No love so tireless, watchful, tender, kind.
The smallest wish I breathe is straight fulfilled.
He worships me and all the more because
He knows he does me deadly, grievous wrong."

Again the tears began to flow. Rohet
Smoothed down the glossy hair. "And is that all,
My queen?" The bent head shook. "I cannot tell
The rest." "What is it, mistress mine?" the girl
Insisted gently. "Tell thine oldest friend,
Who ne'er has failed in her fidelity.
I only beg the privilege to share

Thy heavy load." A long pause followed. Then
The queen, with swift and sudden movement, slipped
Aside her veil and silken vest, and bared
Her arms and shapely shoulders, keeping aye
The tangled locks about her face to hide
Its burning shame. Upon the arms were marks
Where heavy hands had pressed the yielding flesh,
Wide stripes and splotches of an angry hue ;
And on the shoulders was a wound, half-healed,
A thin and lurid line.

With startled eyes
Rohet gazed horror-stricken. Then, " The brute !"
She cried, " The dastard, low-bred cur, to strike
A woman weak and she his loving wife !"
But here the queen sprang quickly to her feet.
" No more, Rohet," she said, and in her eyes
A dangerous sparkle gleamed. " He is our king,
And never friend of mine shall dare abuse
My lord and husband, great in all but this,
His only sin."

Rohet laughed bitterly.

" What fools we women are ! Let but the man
Be strong and great and love us at odd times,
And we will lay our willing bodies down
For him to trample on. We kiss the feet
That spurn, the hand that strikes, and thank with hearts

Aglow with adoration him our lord,
For showing signs like those of interest
In our poor welfare. Fools and doubly fools."

Again the queen spoke low in pleading tone.
"He does not know. His memory is a blank.
It is not he that strikes, but a foul fiend
That enters in his body, rules his mind,
With dread compulsion forces him misuse
His massive strength against the wife he loves.
The great and strong have many enemies,
And many are the secret foes who strive
To bring about his overthrow and death.
Whene'er the amal holds his sense in thrall,
He is as helpless as a sucking babe,
And so, until the mood is passed, I watch
Beside his couch to fend the privy blow
That aims to take his life. And oft he sleeps
Inert and motionless the livelong day
Or night. At other times a fury seems
To seize him. For a space, a madman fierce,
He raves about the room, and vain I strive
To pacify the tortured soul, pursued
By devilish dreams and demons of despair.
'Tis then he sometimes lays his weighty hand,
That does not know its strenuous power, upon
My shrinking flesh. 'Tis nothing, dear Rohet,

'Twas wrong of me to show it. What he does
Is done in ignorance. He does not know."

"But fear'st thou not the day will come when he
Will kill thee in his madness?" "Welcome be
That day! Thou'rt right, Rohet. We fools will kiss
The hand that strikes, and I will gladly bare
My bosom to the blow if 'tis my lord
Who striketh home. It is not this I fear,
But that the Rao, when in his savage mood,
Or after in his fit of dark remorse,
May slay himself. The poison which he drinks,
Would kill six other men. And when he wakes,
He crouches by the window, and I read
Self-murder in his eyes. And gladly he
Would sheathe his dagger in his breast, but this
He knows that I, his injured wife, would burn
A living victim on his funeral pyre.
And oh, the pity of it all, Rohet!
His real self is all nobility.
No husband half so loving, true and kind.
No knight so chivalrous to help the weak.
Moreover he's the genius of war,
And by his wisdom so hath built the state
On sure foundation strong of men and wealth,
That we are dreaded far and wide. And now
'Twill end in nothing. Every day I mark

The rottenness creep higher. Soon the tree
 So glorious in its strength, will bend and fall,
 And after naught but ashes of decay.
 How can I watch his ever weakening powers,
 The daily sap, the wisdom in decline,
 And yielding place to folly. This it is
 Will kill me in the end. Is killing now."

Her tears exhausted long, the weary queen
 Resumed her attitude, and chin on hand,
 Looked out upon the hills with hopeless eyes.
 "Can we do nothing?" asked Rohet. "One word
 To him, thy sire——" "Would fling both realms in
 war,

And bring no remedy," the queen replied.
 "Why rob me of my only comfort, this,
 Till now my shame is hidden from my kin?"

Rohet's fair brow was drawn in serious thought.
 "I feel there is a plan will cure thy woe,
 Could we but hit upon it. Hast thou e'er
 Heard speak of learned doctors who can cure
 Great ills by lesser?" "Read no riddles, child!
 Is this a time for jests and mockery?"
 "No jest, my queen, but if by chance the Rao
 Should find the wife, whom he enshrines as saint
 Of spotless virtue, sunk in lethargy
 Beneath the sleep-compelling amal's sway,

The knowledge that his base example dragged
His angel to the mire, might give a blow
So great——” “No, no, I could not be so vile,”
Her mistress moaned.

Rohet, with sidelong glance
Of temptress, spoke in accent low. “No need
To drink the draught, my queen. The men are
folk

Of stolid brain, and easy to deceive.
A little fond pretence——” But Ketu cried,
“No more, Rohet! I could not do it, no!
Rememberest thou the vision by the well?
And dost thou ask me take the shape of beast,
And by my vileness raise him from his slough?
Believe me, I should fail to raise, and he
Would drag me with him to a deeper depth.”

Rohet said to herself, “Were I the queen,
I’d lash him with the scorpions of my tongue,
Or act the lie in every detail vile,
And he should either slay me in his wrath,
Or I would have him docile to the hand
As any beaten cur. But I forsooth
Am baser metal. See how rings the true!
There sits my mistress ready aye to weep,
But will not lift a hand to help herself.
Nobility forbids.”

Again the girl

With puckered brows, thought long and deep. At last
A sudden flash gleamed in her eyes as if

A light had dawned. "There is a way, my queen.

'Twere strange if woman's wit, of which we made

So oft a foolish boast, should fail us now."

"No folly or suspicion of disgrace?"

Poor Ketu murmured. "Naught a seraph pure

Would call in doubt. For one brief hour to keep

Thy courage to the sticking point, and leave

The rest to me, and in return, thy Rao

Shall live again for thee in sanity

And cleanliness of body and of mind."

"What is thy plan?" her mistress asked. "Trust me,

It is not fear will hold me back." Rohet

Bent down and whispered to the willing ears.

The queen at first was startled, then a smile

Curved slowly round her lips. "A desperate chance,"

She said, "But still a glint of hope! I'll do

Thy bidding, heart and soul, and may the gods

Deal kindly with us!"

III

THE AWAKENING

Again the eastern sky is in a glow
With fire of star dust which the chariot wheels
Of morning churn and winds fling wide upon
The sun god's path. And ray by ray the light
Steals softly through a casement open thrown,
And falls upon a bed where lies a form
Gigantic, prone upon its back, the limbs
Contorted out of human semblance fair,
The idiot mouth agape ; and on the brow
A noisome bat entangled in his hair
Sits like an evil spirit, wicked eyed,
And gnaws and beats its wings. The sleeper turns,
And with a stertorous snore awakes, to cower
In shaking terror at the thing which grips
His brow with bony claw. A sudden blow
Sets free the vermin of the night, which flies
In twittering circles twice around the room,
To vanish through the window, while a groan
Comes from the giant's lips. " My God ! I thought
I lay in hell and this a devilish imp
Tormented me. A bat ! No more ! The drug
Unmans me quite."

He struggles heavily,
As if the limbs unwillingly obey
The feeble mind's control, and draws himself
Into a sitting posture on the bed.
His great feet touch the floor, and so he sits
For long, all dazed and stupid, with his chin
Sunk in upon his breast ; and then with look
Of puzzled 'wilderment, he lifts one foot
Into the light across his knee, and sees
The sole is red and wet. He touches it
And smells the odour salt of blood, and still
The dull mind strives in vain to comprehend,
The dull eyes gaze in vacant foolishness.

And slowly from the window filtering down
The grey light lower steals ; until it rests
Upon the floor. What shape is this, half-clothed,
That lies so very still beside his feet ?
He tries to think. " Last night it lay not there.
What is it ? " Bending o'er, a woman's dress
He sees, but cannot see the face beneath
The mat of raven hair. He lays one hand
An instant on the shoulder. Cold as death !
And now a tremour seizes all his frame.
A grisly thought is rising in his brain.
He beats it back. " No, no, it cannot be.

This wholesome world to naught so hideous
Could e'er give birth." And yet he fears to lay
The spectre, turn the body o'er and solve
His doubt. A dew streams from his brow, his hands
Open and shut convulsively.

At last

He cannot bear the dread uncertainty,
The torture of the doubt. A sudden jerk
Spasmodic, and a pale face looks at him
With sightless eyes, the mouth a smudge of blood.
His doubt is solved. His wife is lying there.
In rigid attitude, one stiff arm bent,
Points up in accusation mute and stern,
"Thou art the man." "My Ketu dead!" he moans,
And cowers at her side in panic wild.
"I cannot think. My mind is all a blank.
Why point at me? I did not do the deed.
I could not hurt thee, I, whose love for thee
Absorbs my being whole." And then he raves
In incoherent babblings, words of love,
And oaths and passionate denials. Still
The horror of the dreaded truth creeps near
And ever nearer, like a savage beast
That stalks a trembling hind and all the while
The victim views the perilous approach
And yet it cannot flee.

IV

THE SCORPIONS OF HER TONGUE

“ Rohet, Rohet ! ”

He tries to shout, but only whispers hoarse
Come from his parched tongue and quivering lips.
“ Will no one listen, no one come ? ” Though low
The voice, 'twas wonderful how swift Rohet
Obeyed the summons. “ I am here, my lord.
What needest thou ? ” He pointed to the form
Upon the floor. “ Thy mistress ails.” At once
The girl ran to the prostrate body, gazed
One moment wild-eyed, gasping with affright,
Bent down and placed her hand upon the heart,
Then spoke in tone of concentrated grief
And woe. “ This is not ailing. This is death.
My mistress dead, and blood upon her lips !
What marks are these where giant fingers pressed
Her rounded throat ? No natural death is this,
But murder foul.” Her startled questioning eyes
Went slowly round the room until they found
The wretched figure whimpering on the bed.
“ And thou the murderer ! ” In sudden burst
Of wrath that will not be controlled, she ran
And strove with all her strength to shake the vast

And ponderous shoulders, moved them scarce an inch,
Then struck with open palm the flabby cheek
Beslobbered with a flood of useless tears.

In the uncertain light, the body seemed
To move as in resentment on the floor.
Yet he, the giant, heeded not, but cringed
In shameful self-abasement to the girl.
“I can remember naught. Not mine the fault!
I swear I did not do the deed.” Rohet
Let loose her woman’s fury unrestrained.
“Liar and coward, were it not for this
Sweet angel lying here, thou hadst been food
Long since of dogs and vultures. She it was
Who all unarmed, opposed a dozen foes
To rescue thee, the amal slave, not worth
One hair upon my darling’s head. Poor fool!
She trusted to a drunkard’s oath, and gave
Her heart and soul and all to thee, than whom
No baser ruffian lives to bring disgrace
Upon the Hara name. No Rajput thou!
Mean bastard, on thy sacred mother’s fame
Thou heapest lasting ignominy vile.”

The poison of her winged words bit deep
Into his deadened sense. Uneasily
He shifted to a posture more erect.

“Within a month thine oath was empty air.
Did she upbraid? No syllable of blame
E’er passed her lips. She gave no sign, the least,
To show she knew thy perjured infamy;
But seeing thee, bemused and helpless, sunk
In brutish self-indulgence, like a hog
Who wallows in his mire, and hearing that
Thine enemies went secretly about
To slay thee, she, thy murdered wife, did watch
For days and nights beside thy bed. With what
Reward? To be mishandled foully, struck,
And bruised by him she guarded. Do not think
This night the first time thou didst lift thy hand
Against the martyred saint. Myself have seen
Her wounds on arms and neck, signs-manual
Of thy devotion pure. And now the end
Has come and murder has cut short the life
That spent itself for thee. Another like
The thing thou art, pray God, is found ’mong beasts
And not with men.”

V

ONE WAY ALONE

The great man slowly rose.

The morning light shone brightly in the room.
The gloom of night had vanished, and Rohet
Stood lost in growing wonder while she watched
A transformation strange come o'er the chief.
His look of brutish drunkenness had passed.
His face retook its manhood, with the impress
Of sorrow infinite upon the lines
Across the brow. The mouth was firm and proud.
The eyes were steady, fixed on vacancy,
As if they saw a vision far away.
The voice was also changed, and rolled once more
In accents deep and full. Its sum of woe
Seemed fathomless as ocean when her waves
Bemoan her waste of desolation spread
Abroad with ne'er a bound.

“My wife is dead.

The flower of my heart's love is withered. Mine
The hand that plucked the blossom, so thou sayest.
The light that gleamed upon my darkness drear
Is cold, and mine the guilt that quenched its beam.
I will not add the insult of attempt

To extenuate the crime, of all the worst.
Farewell, beloved ! I am not worthy e'en
To take one parting glance at thy dear form.
One way and one alone before me lies,
One hope, that through the narrow gate of death
My soul may pass, and by the cleansing fire
Of deep damnation so be purified
That in some future aeon it may meet
My darling face to face in her bright sphere,
And, clean and stainless, kneel before her feet,
Confess, and pardon ask, and be forgiven."

VI

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

He took a dagger hanging on the wall,
Drew forth the blade and raised his hand in act
To strike his naked throat. Rohet sprang quick
And seized the uplifted arm and shouted, " Stay !
Thou knowest not what thou doest." So they swayed
A moment, when there rang across the room,

A hollow groan and then a breath long drawn.
The struggle ceased, and girl and chieftain gazed
In wild surprise upon the floor where lay
The body of the queen. The accusing hand
Had sunk and lightly lay upon the breast.
The upturned sightless eyes were closed. The breath
Of life was heaving in the bosom fair
With fitful rise and fall

One look he cast,
And then with rapid step the chieftain ran,
And in a single movement swift and strong,
Yet marvellously tender, lifted up
The fragile body, placed it on the bed,
And bent his ear to listen to the heart.
“I cannot hear. The throbbing in my brain
Doth drown all other sound. And yet it beats.
I’m sure it beats. A false hope now would be
Too devilish.” Rohet an instant leaned
Her ear to hearken. “Yes, it beats,” she simply said.
“It beats. She lives.” He raised his brawny arms
In grateful rapture to the orb of day,
Which flooded all the room with golden light.
Again he lowered his eyes in wistful gaze
Upon the sleeping figure, then without
A sign or word of warning, senseless fell
Across the bed.

The queen, who erewhile lay
As dead, at once was on her feet. "Ro het,
We've killed him by our folly," Ketu cried,
And wrung her hands in anguish. "Nay, not so,"
Replied the girl. "His heart is beating strong.
The shock of losing and regaining thee
Has for a time unhinged the brain, made weak
By amal poison. I will call the leech
To let some blood. Before the day is old,
My lord will be himself."

In this Ro het
Erred grievously. For many months the chief
Lay on the narrow ledge 'twixt life and death,
The body burnt with fever and the mind
A prey to all the furies of remorse.
With tireless vigilance and loving care
The women tended him, until at last
They drew the soul and body from the pit's
Dark brim, and haled him back to life and strength
And human sanity.

VII

THE PARLIAMENT OF TWO

Our Ketu Bai,

Through all those months of sorrow, ruled as queen ;
Rohet her chief-adviser, Hari Raj
Prime-minister, and ancient Daulat Singh
Her army leader. Never Bundi state
Was ruled so well and wisely ; though the men,
Her subjects, seldom willing to allow
That woman can do aught beyond her sphere
Of household cares, in base ingratitude,
Declared that Ketu's little finger was
Far heavier than her giant husband's fist ;
And made a gibe that in their parliament
Of two, the queen and her adviser, every grain
Of finished statecraft to the market came
In heaped-up waggons three of useless talk.

The Rao Narayn reigned for thirty years,
Dreaded abroad, revered and loved at home
By all his people of the Bundi state.
The deadly amal plant he aye eschewed,
And ne'er again was known to taste its draught
Of drugged oblivion. But once alone
Long after in a converse with the bard,

He mentioned his infirmity, and spoke
Of his long sickness. "I was then in hell,"
He said, "and through its flames of torment passed,
And now am purified."

The queen regained
Right soon her loveliness, and Bundi Towers
Oft echoed to her laughter and her song.
Her lord reclaimed, her life thereafter flowed
A stream of joy ideal through a land
Of bright-eyed children playing 'mid the flowers.
Though here again men's jealous tongues declared
Their noble Rao did dread one thing alone,
And that his dauntless courage in the field
Was only equalled by his prudence great
At home.

For two long years the queen ne'er made
The least allusion to that dreadful morn
Of pain and sorrow. Then one day when she
Was playing with her firstborn son and heir,
The while her chief adviser combed her locks,
She said, "Rohet, I oft have wondered how
Thou didst so opportunely waken him ;
And for the blow thou gavest, well I ween,
The Rao would have thy head, could he but call
To mind that act of stark rebellion."
The counsellor-in-chief here tossed in air

Her dimpled chin. “ I do regret, not that
I struck the blow, but that it came too nigh
To spoiling plans so well and deeply laid.
Forgive me, O my queen ! Thou hast thy Rao,
Thy hero, safe restored to thy fair arms
As perfect knight. Remember this, ’twas I,
Rohet, thy poor handmaiden, gave him thee.
And as for how I roused the sleeping chief !”
The girl here laughed until the merry tears
Hopped down her cheeks. The baby jumped and
crowed,
And clapped its little hands. “ The means to wake
A man are many as the stars of heaven.
Suffice it that the way I chose has ne’er
Been tried before and yet succeeded well !”

THE STORY OF PUNNA, THE NURSE

SCENE : CHITOR

TIME : 1536 A.D.

THE STORY OF PUNNA, THE NURSE

CHILD of my brother, thou art good and kind
To this poor crone, who suns herself all day
Before thy doorstep, dreaming, doting, old.
'Tis true I pay thee well. The Rana gives
With open hand. Does he not owe his all
To me? But money cannot purchase make
Of love and kindly tendance such as thine.
A little longer bear with me, I pray !
The heart is broken and the body worn.
The sands of life run low. A few short days
And this poor clay will vanish in the smoke.
For I have seen the vision beautiful.
My boy came down a rainbow stream of light.
I knew him by his eyes and that red star
Upon his breast. A splendid man he was,
All radiant in his beauty and his strength.
He took me by the hand and I became
Once more a winsome maiden, fresh and fair,
And then he led me up that lovely steep
Of rainbow light.

My God, the deed I did
 Has found no equal since the world began.
 Nor man nor woman can compare with me.
 The deed was more than mortal, 'twas divine.
 And yet, while others sin and spend their lives
 In dark remorse, I did the noblest deed,
 Of highest virtue and self-sacrifice,
 And ever since have spent my weary days
 Repenting that I did it. I would give
 My life and very soul that I had sinned,
 A false oath ta'en, a string of plausible lies,
 That come so easy to a woman's tongue,
 And now my boy would be the living king,
 And Mewar * great and glorious 'neath his sway.
 Instead, a coward sits on Sanga's † throne,
 And all the land is ruined.

Some there are
 Who say that Punna lied. "How can this king,
 Who trembles at a sword, have Sanga's blood
 In his white veins? The vixen saved her brat,
 And with a cunning tale, she placed the fool
 To make a mock of Sanga's lordly realm."
 My curse abiding be upon these men!
 Though would to God they spoke the naked truth!

* The kingdom of Chitor.

† The greatest king of Chitor.

Why did I do the deed? Was I compelled
By a dread power that overcame my will?
And can the dead subdue a living soul?
Or was the shadow an illusion bred
Of fear and fancy? Who can tell? This breast
Was never home of virtue such as saints
Alone possess. A village girl was I,
Filled full with all the failings of my kind,
Deceit and meanness, vanity and lies;
And yet I did a deed from which a saint
Would shrink, and shuddering, turn aside in fear.
They call me heroine and world-renowned,
Talk loud of loyalty, the love of kings,
And prate of Rajput's staunch fidelity
To one of Bappa's * line. What boots it now?
The sum is this. My boy is dead, and I
Repent the noble deed that slew my son.

I've told that tale these hundred times. My
child,

I pray thee hear me once again. Perchance
'Tis the last time. The telling soothes my heart.
It seems to glorify my son, as if
The deed were his.

I mind the day right well.
It was a month since our great Sanga died.

* The founder of the kingdom of Chitor.

My husband, Rama,* had gone to till the fields.
 We lived at Ganeshpura, on the road
 That leads to Delhi, close to Chitorgarh.
 A year we had been wedded and my child
 Was six weeks old. I held him on my hip,
 And piling on my head the earthen pots,
 I went to fetch the water from the well;
 And while we gossips chattered at the lip,
 There came a royal herald, riding fast,
 Agleam with red and gold. He stayed his steed,
 And blew upon his trumpet three shrill notes,
 Then cried. "I am the herald of the king,
 And this his warrant. Hear ye and obey!
 Great Sanga's widow, Queen Karnavati,
 Has born a son. The mother ails. A nurse
 Is needed. Choose ye three young mothers, strong
 And of pure Rajput blood, and with their babes,
 Despatch to Chitorgarh † without delay.
 This do, if ye would royal favour find."
 He vanished in a cloud of yellow dust,
 To levy nurse's toll from other towns.

The elders held a council. In the hour
 I and two girls, my kinsfolk, perched high

* Pronounced Rám or Rámá, according to the metre.

† Garh = fort.

On bubbling camels, each behind her man,
Rode swift to Chitorgarh. There found a crowd
Of fifty mothers come to be adjudged
Whose infant was the strongest, who had marks
Of omen good or ill. The palace gate
We entered shy and blushing, stood before
The old queen-mother and her Brahman priest.
They found me strong and healthy, and a mole
On my right shoulder proved me lucky past
Belief. Of all the crowing, lusty rogues
Who drank their mothers' milk, my boy was king.
So I was chosen and the little prince
Was placed upon my bosom to be warmed
And fed to life again.

My sister took my babe
And brought it up with hers, but when the lads
Were weaned, the Rani bid me bring my son
To be the playmate of Prince Udai Singh.
The children loved each other from the first.
They ate and slept together, played their games,
And cried and laughed, and shared each other's joys
And sorrows with the love unquestioning
That children show. In all their pretty sports,
My boy, my Jeswant, ever led the way.
He was a hero in the prince's eyes,
So strong and ready-witted, brave and true.

The prince was ever weak and ailing, yet
A wondrous likeness grew between the two.
They both were Rajputs of the selfsame tribe,
And feeding from my bosom, took perchance
The mould of some forgotten ancestor.

They brought my husband from the plough, and made
Him soldier in the young queen's bodyguard.
Right glad was he to change the care of fields,
For sword and buckler and the easy life
Of palaces and courts.

How can I speak

With even mind of Queen Karnavati?
Her beauty was a miracle of grace.
So fair and fragile that she seemed a child
And not a woman grown, yet in the breast
Of that weak frame abode a dauntless heart.
She knew no fear, withal was gentle, kind,
And passing sweet. I loved her then with all
My strength, and love her now, although she gave
Me cause for hate which only mothers feel.

The times were full of storm and change and strife.
Great Sanga's eldest son, wild Rutna, slew
The Bundi prince, who dying, drove his sword
Through Rutna's breast. Then Rana Bikram ruled,
The foolish pedant, greatest curse of fate,

A weak, good man. He saw the rooted cause
Of Mewar's desolation and decay.
The headlong valour of the Rajput charge
Availed naught against the cannon shot.
The footman with his gun was more than match
For proudest noble on his prancing steed.
He saw, and tried by soothing words to make
The haughty Rajput lay aside his lance,
Dismount from horse and fight upon his feet.
And when he met with flat refusal, feared
To tread his nobles down with iron heel,
As his stern father, Sanga, would have done,
But spent his spleen in railing and abuse.
The nobles rose. The king was forced to flee
And at the instant, seeing all the realm
In disarray, the Moslem host swept down
Upon the city, girdled it and held
Us trapped like rats.

We waited till the night.

The noble queen for one long moment held
Her princeling to her heart, then yielded him
To me. I took both babes, now four years old,
To lead them from the palace. As the folds
Of the great curtain dropped, I turned my head
And saw the queen fall forward to the ground.
I glided back. "My queen, I pray thee come.

To lose thy boy will kill thee. Come with us !
This city is no place for women weak.
To come with us will be less dangerous
Than staying here, and thou wilt have thy boy.”
A dry sob shook her body, then she rose.
“Why talk of danger? We are Rajputs all.
I am the queen. My place is here among
My people. Should the Moslem break the gate,
My honour is as safe in these small hands,
As if ’twere guarded by ten thousand men.
I know the road to death and I will tread
It smiling, for it leads me to my lord.
Now go, my Punna ! leave me to my fate !
And guard my boy as thou would’st guard thine own !”
I bowed and touched her feet, then went my way,
And never more in life beheld that face,
Whose large eyes showed she saw her coming doom.
A few short months, and Queen Karnavati
Led thirteen thousand women to the pyre.
And some there were who wept and shook with fear,
But my brave queen ne’er ceased her steadfast look
And winning smile, and gaily laid her down
On that grim pile as on her marriage bed.
God rest her soul !

That night I took the boys,
And met my husband on the northern wall.

The guard had ropes and lowered us outside.
Then, taking each a child, we clambered down
The hill's rough face. The night was pitchy dark,
But Rama led us by a secret path,
That brought us safely through the Moslem lines.
Then found we camels tethered 'neath a tree,
So mounted and rode on throughout the night.
The third day reached we Castle Komulmer,
And there found shelter till the Moslem blast
Had blown itself away.

Let others tell
Of Rajput courage and the long defence
That grew more hopeless every weary day ;
Of men and women fighting side by side,
With equal hardihood ; of my brave queen,
Like ruined gambler, in one desperate cast,
Staking her very modesty to save
Her city and her people ! Vain, alas !
She sent her favour to the Delhi king,
Though she herself must near have died with shame,
At claiming brotherhood with infidels.
The foolish poetaster gave reply
In many a rhyme of glib and polished wit,
But lingered till all hope of help was passed.
The queen's proud soul went up to God in flame.
The women all were burnt. The men in robes

Of saffron, rushed upon the foe and died,
Or cut their way to freedom. Then the king,
Our brother, bracelet-bound,* God save the mark !
Humayun, Emperor of Delhi, came
With all his laggard troops and snatched the bone,
Our ruined city, from that mongrel dog,
Bahadur Shah, and forced the cur to flee.
Then penned a rhyming couplet, shed the tear
Of courtly gallant on the dead queen's tomb,
And having re-enthroned the fugitive king,
The dallying emperor went his careless way,
The chivalrous knight-errant, fool or knave,
I care not which. His doom was near at hand.
The curse of Chitor's slaughter drove him forth
To wander crownless for full sixteen years,
And die a fool's death.

We in hiding lived
At Komulmer, till Bikram called us home
To Chitorgarh, the city of our pride,
Now sitting desolate amid her ruins,
And mourning for her dead. We led again
Our former life within the palace halls.
My husband bodyguard to Udai Singh,
And I the nurse. The young prince laughed and played,
Forgetful of the mother's gentle hand

* For the story of the bracelet, see Appendix.

That tended him, now dust and ashes, blown
About the world with every wayward breeze.
My Jeswant grew in strength and comeliness,
And ever twined in closer bonds about
My heart. The mother dead, few cared to ask
About the prince, and, God forgive me, now
That he was given over utterly
Unto my care, I placed my own child first.
My Jeswant was the prince, and Udai Singh
His humble servitor and playfellow.
Right royally my boy played out his part,
The prince submitted willingly enough,
And thus we lived a happy quiet life ;
Save that at times I felt a shadow pass
Behind me, touch me on the hand or brow,
As giving me rebuke. It was the dead
Who pleaded for the living, well I knew,
But thrust aside the influence, turned away
And loved my own child best and first and last.
Content thee, O my queen ! my punishment
Was out of all proportion to the wrong.

So two years glided by. Bikram the king
Had nothing learned from all his country's woes,
But like a petulant child, was strong and weak
By fits and starts, and always at a time
Inopportune. The nobles murmured loud.

One day in full durbar, the Rana gave
With solemn face a foolish judgment on
The case in hand. The old Srinagar chief
Objected. Fierce the Rana quickly rose,
And struck the old man with the naked palm
Upon his wrinkled cheek, a coward's blow,
And black ingratitude, for he, the chief,
Had sheltered Sanga in his direst need.
The nobles sprang to feet with one accord,
And left the council hall. I stood behind
The lattice, peering through, and as they passed,
I heard the Lord Chondawat mutter low,
"My brothers, hitherto we've only smelt
The flower, but now must eat the bitter fruit."
Srinagar's whiskers went above his eyes,
As when a tiger grins. Behind his hand
He spat and chuckled, "Bitter fruit or sweet,
To-morrow we shall know its flavour well."
My blood ran cold at the fell glare that gleamed
From those old eyes upon the fated prince.
I knew he stood in deadly danger, yet,
Fool that I was, I never thought the cloud
Which hung o'er him, would burst upon us too,
Or that his peril sore was ours as well.
There followed calm, and for a week we lived
Our former life of simple, dull routine.

One morning rising early, I looked forth
Upon the palace yard and saw the chief,
Srinagar, deep in converse with a man,
Armed at all points, a helmet on his head.
The face, a tangled mass of bristly hair,
Coal black, whence shone two bold and fiery eyes,
Whose gaze went slowly round the palace walls,
Intent and curious, as if the sight
Were new to them. I marvelled who the man
Might be. A stranger surely ! When my arm
Was touched by Rama, my husband. "See," he
said,
"The grey crow and the eagle rubbing beaks.
They smell some carrion near. Let Bikram take
Good heed !" "Who is he, then ?" "The bastard
son
Of Prithwi Raj, Bunbeer, the chief of Gir.
His coming bodes no good to Sanga's line."
We watched them till they parted. "Punna mine,
If Bunbeer slay the king, dost thou not fear
For Udai Singh, thy ward ?" "They dare not do it,"
I cried, but at my heart the sudden fear
Struck chill. "What ! kill the last of Sanga's sons,
A babe all innocent, to place Bunbeer,
A bastard, on the throne ? For very shame
They dare not do it." "Mayhap ! But if they dare,

What canst thou do, my little one, to save
Thy princeling from their swords ? ” Indeed ’twas true.
I saw it now too late. The net was cast.
The young lion and the old were both enmeshed,
And we could nothing do save watch and wait.

The time crept slowly by. The air we breathed
Was full of wild alarm. I racked my brain
To fashion some poor vestige of a plan,
But all in vain. The sun had set an hour,
The boys had eaten of their evening meal,
The rice and milk and curds, and lay asleep
Upon one bed, their little arms entwined.
I sat and thought and listened. Sudden came
A roar of voices, clash of steel, and then
The clang of closing door, a flying step,
And Rama panting, rushed into the room.
“ Bunbeer has slain the Rana, and e’en now
He comes to kill the prince. I’ve raised the bar.
The heavy door will make them some delay.
Give me our boy ! I’ll hide him ’neath my cloak,
And bear him hence. Bunbeer is raving mad
With lust of slaughter, and the sword that kills
The prince may kill our son. Give me the boy ! ”
And as he spoke, a long-drawn cry went up.
Too often had I heard to make mistake.
The cry of women wailing for the dead !

Then came the tramp of heavy feet, the clash
Of iron maces beating on the door.

I ran across the room and never thought
To do save what my husband bade me. Dim
And flickering burnt the lamp. But when I stooped
Above the boys, a shadow lay across
Prince Udai's form. Two wild eyes gleamed on mine
From out a pallid face that came and went;
In the uncertain light a hand was raised
As if to guard. "My queen Karnavati!"
I cried and started back. The fluttering lips
Uttered a moan. "O Punna, save my boy!"
A madness seized me, numbing all my sense.
I moved as if another held my will.
Without a word I lifted Udai Singh
And wrapped him in a shawl to hide his face,
Then gave him to my husband. Swiftly Rama
Sped down the western corridor, while I
Stood calmly waiting for my poor boy's death,
As if he were no kith or kin to me.

The heavy door crashed down. The crowd fell back,
As struck with shame. One heavy stride alone
Came on and up. The curtain swung aside
And Bunbeer stood before me, holding high

A sword still dripping blood. His arms and hands
And e'en his hair and eyes were lurid red.
"Art thou the nurse? 'Tis death to speak me false,"
He roared. I bent my head. "Where is the boy,
Prince Udai Singh?" I pointed to the bed.
He strode across, pulled down the sheet and raised
His armed hand. It fell. The rosy star
Grew large upon my darling's breast. His eyes
Gave one quick look, then closed for aye. The head
Turned sideways wearily. He fell asleep
Quite gently, as a thousand times I've seen
Him fall, but this time never more to wake
And cheer his mother's heart with merry cry.

The butcher muttered, "Now in very sooth
I am the king," and turned and strode away.

When died the echo of his steps, the power
That held me passed, the knowledge of my deed
With its fell consequence rushed in upon
My mind. I was a murderess; had killed
My sleeping son. I staggered 'neath the blow,
Which sent me groping, stumbling through the room.
I fell upon the bed and touched the feet,
Now growing quickly cold. A sudden thought
Strung taut my nerves and haled me back to sense.
"The deed is done. The sacrifice complete.
'Twere piteous folly if this holy blood

Be shed in vain. They must not recognize
The poor dead innocent as being mine."

I marked the wan face with the ruby stain
Now spread o'er all his breast. I brought some gems,
Some pretty trinkets of the little prince,
And placed them round his neck and arms and wrists.
Was ever dead that looked so beautiful?
I took one kiss, and then my passion seized
Me with a furious frenzy of despair,
The frightened women entered, horror-struck,
And found me raving like a thing possessed.
My hands were clenched. I beat my breast and laughed
And gibbered, while a stream of burning tears
Blinded my eyes. Yet in my fury held
I fast to my one secret, guarded it
With all the strength of my poor scattered wits.
The innocent blood must not be shed in vain.
To save the prince his nurse must act the lie,
In every cunning detail, till it grows
Like truth.

* * * * *

Child of my brother, didst thou say
The sun had set? Methinks 'tis strangely light,
And all around are flowers blowing sweet.
I do not mind I saw them yesterday.

Their fragrance breathes a breath of youthful life
Into this bosom old. Why press my hands
And bid me take my rest? First hear me end
My tale! The last time I shall tell it thee.
That night they built a stately, royal pyre,
And laid my son with every fitting rite
Beside the murdered king. I seem to see
It now. The flames and smoke, one flying wreath
That rises up to heaven. Look, my child!
The world is all aglow with rainbow light.
How strange and sweet the perfume of the flowers!
The light is all around me, and I feel
Quite young and strong again. My tale? yes! yes!
The flying wreath of smoke becomes a cloud,
The cloud a shining shape that rushes down
The steep of rainbow light. How glorious
His face! The rosy star! My son! my son!

THE WOOING OF THE STRONG MAID

SCENE: THE JUNGLES OF CHITOR

TIME: 1290 A.D.

THE WOOING OF THE STRONG MAID

Two hours before the dawn lit up the east,
We saddled horse and left the snoring camp.
I on black Badul,* Ajit on his grey,
And our three knaves on squealing stallions, stole
Like ghosts through fallow, field and jungle land,
All clouded with a vapour damp and dun.

A sudden wind, the herald of the dawn,
Blew wide the mists, and lo, the sky was red,
And I, who never dreamed of women, thought,
“ ’Tis like a girl’s cheek when her lover calls.”

So strong my mood was moved by the event.

Then Ajit cried, “Thou’rt dozing, brother.† Wake,
And take a shorter grip ! There goes a boar ;
I ween a galloper, so long and lank.
See how the villain gnashes on his tusks !
I’ll wager my full purse I take the spear.”

* Cloud.

† In India, cousins often call each other “ Brother.”

He parted with a shout. The lean boar heard
And on the instant broke into a long
And clattering stride. I dropped my bridle hand,
And in the second mile my Badul passed
The sobbing grey, with Ajit whipping wild.
Another plunge and as the mountain boar
Vanished within a field of maize, I leaned
Far forward and with glittering spear point traced
A thin red line along the grizzled flank.
"Thy purse, my Ajit ! Badul knows no match,
And thy fat grey will never bear the palm
With her fat master pressing her round sides."
My cousin laughed. "I'll pay to-morrow morn.
But as to this same boar, the beast is couched
In this dense maize as in the thickest wood.
No horse can enter. Let us seek some men,
Peasants or herdsmen, who will drive him out !"

We turned to ride, when suddenly my heart
Gave one great bound, stood still and left me faint,
While all my soul was drawn into my eyes
In adoration deep. I gazed and could
Not cease from gazing, so the wonder grew,
Bewitching with its beauty. On a rock
Not twenty paces from us stood a girl
Just budding into womanhood. The sun,

New risen, bathed her with his golden light.
Her black hair flowed about her. Feet and neck
And arms were bare. Beneath her swarthy skin
The red blood coursed and burned like ruddy gold.
Her eyes were laughing and her white teeth gleamed.
A figure like a woodland fairy wild,
Strong, supple, beautiful, and from her soul
I seemed to hear a voice that cried aloud,
“Thou art my mate, my bosom’s lord, my love.”
And at the cry my heart swelled nigh to burst.

“Good sirs, what lack ye?” Like a trumpet rose
Her voice so loud and clear. Then Ajit rode
And churl-like placed his hand upon her neck.
“My girl, our boar has couched in yonder maize,
And if——” he finished with a whimpering cry,
Like beaten dog. The girl had gripped his hand
In one of iron. I could see the tense
Muscle grow white as she aye crushed and crushed,
Till jumped the blood in spurts from out the tips
Of his wan fingers. Then she threw him off,
Her eyes and teeth aglitter like the mask
Of a she-wolf, but laughing still, she cried,
“Your boar has couched, and you, brave gentles, fear
To drive him out, and need a maiden’s help.
Well, I will aid ye, lest your mothers’ babes

Go home and weep for what they dare not take."

She ran as swift as startled deer, and snatched
In passing from my hand the lance, and then
Plunged in the corn upon the wild boar's trail.

Her words and action followed each so swift
That I was wholly dazed. My cousin's look
Of amorous coarseness and his touch upon
Her neck, as if the girl had been a wench
That strolls the streets, had made my blood run hot
And my ten fingers itch to clutch his throat.
But then the maid's surpassing strength and beauty,
Her words that stung like whip-lash on the cheek,
Her savage fierceness, all bewildered me.
Her name and dwelling, faith, I did not know.
But this I knew that she, a village girl,
Was running to her death and I stood there,
A gaping fool, and idly let her die.
And also that I loved her with the force
Of all my being. Quick I leaped to earth,
And tugging at my dagger, followed fast
The line of waving corn where she had passed.

Sudden there came the hoarse, deep grunt of boar
Who charges home, and then a paean, shrill and
wild,

“The victory is mine! I’ve won, I’ve won.”

I pushed aside the corn and there beheld
The maid, who leant her weight upon the spear,
And swaying this and that way, strove to keep
The boar at bay. The dying beast was pierced
Fairly above the shoulder. Still he strove,
Silent and furious, to work his way
Along the spear and dying take revenge,
Though every inch he gained, the blade ran deep
Into life’s very fastness. Came the end ;
The brute fell sideways dead. The girl, her hand
Upon her panting breast, again shrilled out,
“To me the victory! I’ve won, I’ve won.”

Then plucking out the spear, she waved it thrice
About her head, as if she wove a charm.
Her large eyes flamed with a look that touched
Insanity. She seemed the goddess dread
Of death and battle. Seeing me she cried,
“Ah ha, my timorous gallant! Fear’st thou not
To follow when a maiden leads the way?”
She seized the dead boar by the two hind legs
And putting forth a strength that seemed
Gigantic, drew it forth into the field ;
And when I strove to aid, she shook me off
As light as thistledown. “Here, gentles, lies

Your boar. Had I not found this way
To shame ye all as men were never shamed,
I would have twisted round that bull-calf's neck
And cracked his spine like any rotten stick.
A Rahtor Rajput I! No strolling wench!
And he that tries to shame me dies the death."
She ceased and laughed her reckless laugh again,
Then fled with rapid foot into the maize.

Anon we saw her swiftly mount and stand
Upon the platform where the watchers sit
To fright the birds. She whirled her sling and
threw
Her pellets here and there, shouting the while,
A cry that echoed like a silver bell.
Our varlets brought us food and wine. My coz
Filled high a cup and drained it at a draught.
Then first he found a tongue. "The wilful jade!
A spiteful wild cat! Curse her wit and strength!"
He drank again, and at the moment flew
A pellet whistling, struck him on the brow,
Made his head ring and both his eyes to dance.
"A civil tongue, my lords! My ears are like
To lynxes', and I never miss my aim."
Again her laugh flew up like a wild bird
And ended with a mocking bit of song,

“ A gallant wooed a jungle maid
In summer time beneath the shade.
He kissed her once, he kissed her twice.
His heart was cold ere he kissed her thrice.
Ha ha for the jungle maid !”

Each note rang clear and musical. Our brows
Were dark with shame, and Ajit cowered down,
With white lips muttering, “ She is a witch,
Some devil of the woods, and we are lost.”
The thought came home to me as in a flash.
“ Was she indeed a devil? How could maid
Have strength and skill and courage like to hers?
Rather a goddess in her supple grace,
In look and word imperious as a queen !”
Then swore I softly to my heart, “ My girl,
Or goddess, devil, queen, or simple maid,
Thou art my mate to have and hold, my wife,
My other self. My being aches for thee.
My blood runs red and burning with desire
Of thee. And I will win thee for my bride,
My mate forever through the years to come,
Though I run risk of everlasting pain,
And death and hell.”

 The whole day long I thought
And mused and dreamed. Anon the evening fell.

We turned our faces homewards, when the girl
Came, bearing on her head a jar of milk,
And driving goats and kids, a bleating flock,
Before her. Softened seemed her mood and shy,
As though the gathering shade had charmed her
soul

To gentleness. "What is thy name, my child?"

I asked with deference, fearful to arouse
The sleeping fury hidden in her eyes.

"Unwitting all, we have offended thee.

We ask thee pardon and would beg thy name."

She gave me one quick look as if to know

Whether I mocked or not. "My father's name
Is Runjit. Rathors are we, poor and proud.

The noblest blood of kings flows in our veins.

That house is ours and these few fields of corn;

But as for my name, that I do not tell

Except to him I wed." She caught my glance

That glowed with undisguised love, and slow

The crimson colour flowed o'er face and neck.

Her eyes dropped, while a little shudder shook

Her frame.

Anon she shepherded her flock

Towards her father's house. We followed. Soon

We reached the portal, entered in the court,

And there a huge man found, who sat and smoked

And oped a sleepy eye at our approach.
A yokel, heavy, slow, yet with the strength
Of ponderous bull, who dozes in the shade.
“Here is,” thought I, “the primal cause that gave
My girl her force and hardihood.” “Fair sir !”
We all saluted with the upward sweep
The Rana taught us. “Art thou Runjit Singh,
The Rahtor ?” “Even so,” the big man boomed
With voice of distant thunder. “Who are ye ?”
“I am Prince Ursi, eldest son of him
Who is your king, the Rana Lakumsi.”
“My king !” His gusty laughter shook the house.
“Here is the king of all this countryside.”
He lifted high a fist as hard and large
As wooden hammer used for driving pegs.
“And what do princes in my humble cot ?”

I stifled down my wrath and spoke him fair,
Although it irked me not to lay my whip
Across his face. “Our purpose, gentle sir,
Is quickly told. This morn by chance I met
Thy daughter working in yon field of corn.
Her name she would not tell, though at the first
Glance of her eyes, I loved her heart and soul ;
And I am here to take her for my wife.”
“Her name !” the big man laughed a loud ha ! ha !

"I mind the last Dasehra,* when there came
 A goodly crowd of neighbours to our feast.
 I called her fetch a jar of cool palm wine,
 Forgot her ladyship's command and voiced
 The half her name. The vixen in a trice
 Had seized a brand, and fired my hair and beard.
 And thou, a prince, would'st take her for a bride?
 No, no! we want no silken gallants here,
 But men with thews and sinews who can till
 These fields when I——" He broke off short, his
 jaw
 Hung down. Then turned he to his hookah, took
 A pull and hid himself in clouds of smoke.

The cause—fat Ajit chuckled loud and long—
 A little bright-eyed housewife, quick and spry
 As mother hen, came swiftly from a door,
 To where the big man sprawled. She seized an ear
 And pulled him to his feet. "Thou fool!" she cried,
 "Thou stupid oaf, to sit before a prince!
 My gracious lord, I pray thee pardon us!
 We are but humble folk, of manners rude.
 The honour thou dost offer is too great
 For village folk. In truth we are very poor.
 But our descent we trace to Marwar's king.

* The Rajput national festival.

Our blood is royal. Therefore take the girl.
We freely give her thee for wedded wife."

"What talk is this of giving?" cried a voice.

I turned. The girl was standing 'neath the arch,
Her arms across her chest, her head thrown back,
Her upper lip side-lifted in disdain.

The setting sun shone redly on her brow.

"What talk is this of giving? Am I yours

To fling as dole to the first passer-by

Who begs me? No! this body is mine own.

This right arm wields no puny force! and woe

To him who dares to wed me 'gainst my will!"

The father fell to cursing, while the wife

Scolded and railed. The girl stood firm and proud,

Beating her little foot upon a stone.

A sudden thought illumined all my soul,

A good thought sent by kindly gods above.

"Some maids are won by gentleness, but this,

Of different mettle, can alone be won

By force. A splendid animal, she yields

To him who conquers by the strength of arm

And hand." I read the challenge in her eye.

"Should I, the strongest man in all the guard,

Who'd won the ram in many a wrestling bout,

Give way before a girl?"

My spurs closed in.

Black Badul reared and plunged. The girl stood fast,
Ne'er moved an inch, but as we passed at speed,
And I bent down and seized her by the waist,
Struck upward fiercely with her clenched fist.
Next instant, Badul thundered through the arch.
My eyes were blinded by the blood that flowed
From my cut forehead. In my arms I held
A maddened thing, that bit and struck and fought
And screamed like devil newly fished from hell.
We flew at furious speed. A dozen times
She nearly wrenched away, but I held fast,
One arm about her waist, and her two hands
Locked in my left. Sudden her head fell back,
Her eyelids closed, the struggling ceased, the girl
Had fainted or was conquered. Back I reined
The steed, and holding her inert, I gazed
Upon the fairest woman I had seen,
Or ever hoped to see. No toy was this
To pass an idle hour, but a strong mate
To bear me warrior sons, and yet withal
The grace and power so subtly were combined,
That I was lost in wonder how so slight
A frame could show such strength.

Her large eyes oped,

She looked me in the face, but lay quite still.

Her bosom fluttered like a wild bird caught
And caged. Her lips shook, and a faint appeal
Was lurking in her wild, wide-opened eyes.
I dipped my finger in the blood that stood
Upon my cheek, and marked her on the brow.
“ With this my blood, I mark thee for my bride.”
I stooped and kissed her lips, once, twice, and thrice,
Remembering the song she sang erewhile.
“ With these my kisses seal thee for mine own.
Thy name, my pretty one? ” “ Jawahir Bai ! ”
She murmured, blushing, and I knew my bride
Was wholly won, the victory complete.
Then slipping to the ground, she sat her down
And burst into a flood of tired tears.
Then of her own free-will she came to me,
And put her hand in mine and said, “ My lord
And master, I am thine till death.”

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

SCENE: THE RAJPUTANA DESERT

TIME: CIRCA 1460 A.D.

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

I

THE CASTLE OF MAROT

THE sombre castle of Marot stands high
Upon a jagged pinnacle of rock,
That rises from the sea of yellow sand,
Like some wrecked galleon of the Spanish Main,
Left derelict to mercy of the waves.
The level plain spreads round as far as eye
Can see, and everywhere the sand, wind-swept,
Climbs up in rounded billows, desolate
And waste, with ne'er a tree nor blade of grass
To break its flaming tints of tawny gold,
Save at long intervals a little isle
Of greenery around a lonely well
Gleams like an emerald on a brazen tray.
The town is clustered at the steep hill's foot
About a tiny lake, and to the east
It rises tier on tier of white stone roofs
To half-way up the rock, as if it stretched

An arm for aid to the huge pile which frowns
Above with massive walls and battlements
And lordly towers and mighty bastions ;
A virgin keep that ne'er has been defiled
By hand of conqueror, although full oft
Ensanguined war has pressed his furious suit.

II

THE RAWAL AND HIS QUEEN

The sun was near his setting when the chief,
Old Rawal Chachick, and the aged crone
His wife, the Rani Sonaldevi, stood
Upon the bastion beetling o'er the lake,
And through the narrow arrow-slits looked down
Upon the town and out across the plain.
The two from long propinquity had grown
Strangely alike in form and feature, both
Hook-nosed, lean-faced, fierce-eyed, with loosened hair
In elf locks on their brows. They looked a pair
Of hungry eagles moulting with the lapse
Of centuries of time. Old age had bent
Their shoulders, left their bodies thin and frail.

You ne'er would think that crooked frame belonged
To Rawal Chachick, who in days long past
Was loved by all the girls for merry eye,
And strength and beauty, wit and gallant grace.
The queen, more bent and withered than her lord,
Was scarcely taller than an eight years' child,
Yet fifty years ago this was the flower
Of all the fairest in the mountain land,
When Riever Chachick rode the country side,
And seeing plucked, and homeward brought in pomp
And pride to his strong castle of Marot,
To be for half a century his spouse
And comrade, leal and true.

"To furthest bound,"

The old wife croaked, "the whole wide circle, all
Is thine, my Rawalji." "'Tis true, my child."
Though time had written seventy years and five
Upon her wrinkled face, he called her still
By that old pet name of her early youth.
"And scarce a rood unwatered by my blood.
I left my father's house a beardless boy,
With two score riders and my steed and lance,
And not an inch of soil to call mine own.
And now," he waved his hand, "the work is done.
This realm of desert land and oasis
I've won, and hold with power so absolute,

No bird dare twitter, nor a fox dare bark,
Until I pass the word."

The winter air

Was chill, and though the twain were wrapped in cloaks
Of wadded cotton to the chin, the chief
Shuddered, and suddenly his aged frame
Bent double with a racking cough that shook
Him nigh to pieces, with the rending sound
An imp would make who broke him bone by bone.
His wife's keen eyes grew dim. She laid a hand
That looked more like a claw, upon his back,
And gently patted him. When passed the fit,
The Rawal gasping leaned against the wall.
"It is the Shukr Khan. That night I slew
The Moslem rat and burned his town and took
His wives as slaves, I lay beside the marsh
Outside his castle wall, and as I slept
His spirit came and thrust a spirit knife
Into my soul, and now at times the fiend
Twists slowly round the blade. I feel it here.
This tale my priests have told me, and advise
Me whine and tell my beads and give them doles
To lay the ghost. Not I. But when I meet
Old Shukr in the land of shadows, I
Will hew once more his head, this time from off
His ghostly shoulders, and the sword I use

Shall be the bluntest in my armoury.”
He cackled wheezily. “The good old days
Are gone. For five long years I have not struck
A blow in wrath. In this my garden fair
No weed doth dare to grow for fear this arm
Should lop it headless. Yet this very morn
I breathed a whiff of incense from the north
That seemed most like the scent I know so well,
War’s thunderous perfume. Oh, for one true foe
To look me in the eyes, to slay or be
Slain by ! But what a roaring life was mine !
The gallop through the dawn, the ambush laid,
Surprise and harry, flash of sword, and stab
Of spear, the little flickering point that aye,
No matter how the foeman jinks and squeals,
Comes near and ever nearer, till with just
The faintest, happiest sigh, it vanishes,
To peep from out his breast with knowing eye.
Ha, ha !” The ancient warrior grimly laughed.
“And then the captives ! Faith, I seldom found
The bright-eyed wenches less than over kind.
But there, my child, such tales are most unmeet
For thy chaste ears, and though full oft thy hawk
Would range at hazard, yet he aye returned
To find his mistress in this loving hand.”
And gallantly he kissed her wither’d hand.

The Rani smiled. "Right well I call to mind
The princely cavalier who wooed and won
My maiden heart. In all the land was none
Who dare cross swords with thee, or ride thy steed,
Or——" Cried the chief, "Or woo my girl. In truth
The few who crossed me were in haste to pass
To Suryaloca."* The queen went on. "'Tis strange,
To-day and yesterday I've looked at thee,
And seen thy age drop from thee like a robe.
Again thou wert the Rawal of my youth,
Strong, straight, and beautiful. The vision stayed
An instant only. Dost thou think the brain
Of thy old wife begins to turn with age
And sheer decrepitude?" Her features, fierce
And strongly marked, grew very wistful as
With softened eyes she gazed upon her lord.
The Rawal started and his brow grew dark.
"Thou sawest me in semblance of a youth?
My child, it is the warning shadow thrown
By coming fate. My mother saw it ere
My sire rode forth to that great fight at Rukh.
She saw it thrice, and when thou seest it
Once more, be sure thou wilt not look again
Upon my living face." His hand caressed
Her wasted frame. She gave a little sob.

* Heaven

“And I had thought it was a sign of luck.”
“And so it may be,” he rejoined; “for death
Should be a closer friend than life, if time
Has aught to do with friendship. Let him come!
I never feared and do not fear him now.
But cry avaunt to sorrow! Thou, my queen,
Hast lived a life of ease and some content.
For fifty years thy will has been the law
Through fifty leagues.”

III

A FOOL AND HIS FOLLY

“And now the end is near,”
The Rani sighed. “For when thou goest, I
Will not remain behind. ’Tis ever thus
With men. All care they lightly waive aside.
We women nurse our griefs as though we found
In them our chief delight. My life, like thine,
Has flowed a brimming stream of happiness
And hope and joy. And save for one great pain,
No woman would I envy.” “What is that,

My heart?" "Thou knowest well. My firstborn child.
A month before his birth, they brought thee back
From that wild raid against the Delhi king,
More dead than living, with a dozen wounds
That drained thy life away. Three nights I sat
Beside thy bed and never closed an eye,
And when the babe was born, and years rolled on,
And he thy living image grew in health
And strength, but with an idiot's mind, I probed
The depths of sorrow. Curse the boy! I loathe
His very sight."

"Nay, nay," the Rawal cried.
"His wits go wandering through no fault of his.
For thirty years the boy has been a man
In body and in strength. He knoweth well
To use his hands. When odds are three to one,
And men begin to glance to right and left,
I know no better at my side than he,
Thy son, a proper fighting man, although
His brain is like a child's. Not once nor twice
His arm and sword have saved his father's life.
And yet full well I know thou hatest him.
My wife in this is most unmotherly."

The queen replied, "I hate him, true, and from
The first I loathed him from my soul. It seemed
No human child that sucked my mother's breast.

He never laughed nor crowed, but made strange
sounds,

Of bestial sorrow. Never cry of joy
Came from his lips. And yet he thrived and grew.
Thou thinkest me unnatural. Look there !”

She pointed to the courtyard where a man
With comely face and shapely limbs, well-knit
And strong beyond the common run, and dressed
In robes a prince might wear, was running round
And round upon his hands and feet. A dwarf,
A crooked mannikin, bestrode his back,
And whooped him on with view-halloo, as though
They chased a flying quarry. Suddenly
The steed threw off his rider, stood erect,
And lifting heavenward his face, he put
His hand before his mouth, and lo ! the crowd
Of gaping idlers heard the grunt of boar
At bay, the yelling of the baffled pack,
The rallying cry of hunters, dying yelp
Of hound o’erventuresome, the loud, dry clash
Of spear on solid bone, the worry fierce.
Each sound was copied to the very life.
Then all at once the human steed caught sight
Of those two figures standing on the wall
And eyeing him. He ceased his mimic sport,
Abruptly turned, picked up the dwarf as if

He were a childish toy, then swiftly fled,
And through a gloomy doorway disappeared.

A smile as bitter as verjuice writhed round
The queen's thin lips. "There goes our Kumbho Singh,
My firstborn son. Just cause have I for pride.
And this it is that galls me to the quick,
In form and feature he is still thyself,
My Rawal in his prime. And for that fate
Has robbed him of his wits, the people stand
In awe of one they think has dealings dark
With ghosts and evil spirits, let him do
Whatever pleaseth him, and never dare
To cross the fool, or curb his idiocy.
I marvel that thou canst endure thy son
Should so bemean himself to vulgar eyes."

"What wouldst thou," said the chief, "The lad is here,
And we must e'en take up our load and bear
As best we may. We cannot throw it down."

The Rani said, "But we could hide. And then
The dwarf, this Mendak,* takes an impish joy
In urging on the fool to show at large
His folly pitiful. The whip for one
And prison bars——" A gleam of ire shot out
From underneath the Rawal's penthouse brows.

"I pray thee cease. Thou oft hast pressed the point.

* Mendak means "frog," pronounced "Main-duck."

I will not yield. The boy shall live his life
Of idle freedom. Why should I, his sire,
Increase the burden of God's dreaded curse?
And for the Frog—I took him in a raid
From far Bengal. His slit eyes show his race,
A yellow Mongol from the distant north.
I made him jester for his merry wit,
And many a time his quips have raised a laugh
To shake the castle walls of old Marot.
But of his own sweet will he made himself
The guardian, friend, accomplice, plaything, call
Him what thou wilt, of Kumbho Singh. The pair
Go well together. Happy are at least.
I will not part them." Chachick's voice was stern
With settled resolution.

For a time

The two paced on in silence round the wall,
Their usual walk at eventide. Once more
The fool, their solitary cause of strife
Domestic, had stepped in to push their hearts
Apart, as if in this he took revenge
Upon his parents for begetting him
Against his will. The wife was first to cross
The little space between her and her lord.
Its air seemed cold. She shivered as she passed,
And put her withered hand upon his arm.

At once he walked less bent, as though he found
Support in her light touch, and so with peace
Re-entered in their breasts, they went their way
Beneath the battlements.

IV

THE MODEL SONS

Again they stood
Beside an embrasure which overlooked
The long wall sinking to the town and lake,
And suddenly the eyes of both grew bright,
As, leaning forward on the rough-hewn stone,
They watched with growing interest two men
Most gorgeously attired, who sat behind
A sheltering buttress half-way down the hill,
Engaged in earnest converse. "See our sons,
Rundhir and Birsil," said the aged chief,
And gave the crone a little playful push.
"Come, wife! there is the balm of all our grief,
Wer't ten times greater. Blessed indeed art thou
Among all women to have borne such sons,

So royal in their bearing and attire,
So wise in judgment, quick of intellect,
Of courage high, and hearts of truest gold.
In all Rajwara there is not their match.
And not a monarch does not envy us.
The glorious gift was thine, my queen, and I
Am ever grateful, in my pride and joy,
'To thee the best of women and of wives.'

Their faces touched an instant, and the kiss
Took something from the hardness of the lines
Upon their rugged cheeks, and brought a look
Almost of youth into their softened eyes.
Replied the queen, "Thou speakest truth, my king,
No sons so beautiful as ours, and well
I know they love us dearly in return
For favours numberless our loving hands
Have heaped upon them. Dost not think at times
We are too kind? No fears the least have I
For Birsil Rao the younger. Never soul
So noble habited a mortal man.
But Rundhir Singh! The boy is often wild.
I doubt my Rawal's love doth blind his eyes.
I fear thou spoilest him." The chieftain smiled.
"The mother eye will spoil her youngest son.
And if thou hast not spoiled thy Birsil Rao,
'Tis not for want of trying. Rundhir Singh

Has been my special charge. The lad has faults,
But overbalanced by his virtues rare.
I have not spoiled him. 'Tis impossible
To lead astray a soul so richly dowered.
A father's duty eye has held in check
A love perhaps too partial. Nay I fear
Sometimes I've held him with too tight a rein."

They paused awhile to watch with loving looks
The handsome figures seated 'neath the wall.
"I marvel what engrosseth them," the chief
Went on. "Some matter sure of import great."
And then he broke into a neighing laugh.
"The rascals have some secret. 'Twere a jest
Of price, would make them roar anon, if we
Could overhear their counsel." Cried the crone,
"Why not? The pathway on the wall will bring
Us straight above them, whence unseen we can
O'erhear their lightest word. 'Twill be a joy
Of passing sweetness for my mother's heart
To listen to love's language, when the lads
Know not we overhear."

Upon her words
The aged pair descended to the court,
And then, through maze of winding passages,
They reached a postern, which the master-key
The Rawal fitted, quickly opened wide.

With air of mock conspirators, they climbed
Upon the wall which joined the tower and town,
And tiptoed on with many a smile and nod,
Until they reached the coign of vantage which
The Rani pointed out, and here they crouched
With ears alert, scarce venturing to breathe,
Yet quaking with enjoyment of the jest.
The sentry on the battlement looked down,
Then quickly turned away. Not wise, he thought,
To pry upon his dreaded chief with eyes
Too curious.

'Twas Rundhir Singh who spoke.

"And will he never die? Sure eighty years
Should well suffice our paralytic sire.
The man's a glutton at the feast of life."
"No more than our old dam," the younger cried.
"So wrinkled, brown, and ugly! Death to her
Should be a welcome friend who gives release;
And yet I swear she'd show no gratitude
Did we administer the final shove,
Although as mothers go, she might be worse."
His brother spoke. "I do not wholly blame
Our doting sire. The pantaloons at times
Shows yet some sparks of wit. My quarrel is
They think us boys, and keep us aye at school.
I want my rightful heritage, and then

No need to cloak our jolly bouts at night.
And as for girls, the goldsmith's pretty wife——”

The listeners heard no more. The merry jest
Had turned to bitter earnest, and the two
Went limping back with silent steps the way
They came, as if they'd done some monstrous crime
And feared discovery. No word they spoke,
But when the postern door closed to, the chief
Stumbled and would have fallen, had his wife
Not held him with her fragile strength, and so
They passed through lines of servitors, who gazed
With awe upon the faces drawn with grief.
At last and still without a word, they reached
Their chamber. “Shut the door!” The old man's
voice

Was raucous as a crow's. “Put out the light!”
The crone obeyed, then groped towards the bed
To find her husband sitting on the side,
His head bowed in his hands. Upon the floor
She sank and put her arms about his knees,
And sobbed as if her heart would break. But he
Sat motionless and silent, only placed
One arm about her neck to comfort her.

At last her sobs grew still, and timidly
Her shaking hand went up to feel his face.
The beard was wet with tears. Again a pause,

A choking sob or two, and then the wife
First spoke. "And am I now so ugly, I
Who was accounted once so beautiful?
And brown? I used to be so fair. I knew
Old age must set his mark, but never dreamed
He'd turn my beauty into ugliness."
He bent and kissed her forehead. "Always fair
To me, my queen," he whispered in her ear.
Once more the darkened room grew still. Again
It was the wife who spoke.

She had forgotten
Her husband's ruthless strength of will. He was
Omnipotent, and merciless to all
Who dared to cross his path. "What punishment
Wilt thou award?" she asked with trembling voice.
"They die at dawn." The tones were stern with
doom.

She whimpered in her terror. "No, not both,
My husband dear! Not both! Thou wilt not make
Me childless in the evening of my days.
Ah, spare me one! He said there might be worse
Mothers than I. If many worse, his own
Should be among the best. If read aright,
This was his meaning. Spare me him! The boy
Cannot be wholly bad." The Rawal's laugh
Was mirthless as a creaking wheel. "What said

The other pattern of ingratitude ?

‘ The pantaloons has yet some sparks of wit.’

If read aright, it means his worthy sire

Is wisdom’s self. They die the death at dawn.

No further grace I give, who should have slain

Them there upon the instant where they were.”

In vain the Rani pleaded. “ Give me one,
One only ! Slay not both the lads !” The chief
Had said his last stern word, and would not yield,
But sat in angry silence obdurate.

Then Sonaldevi rose and dried her tears,
And lit the lamp, and brought him food and drink,
And tended him as slave upon her lord.

And when at last he laid him down to rest,

He had not issued any curt command

To build a scaffold or arrest her sons.

His eyes were closed, but if he slept or waked

The watchful figure at his side knew not.

Only at midnight did the chieftain groan

Once loud and deep. No other sign he gave

Of his consuming sorrow.

V

THE FOOL AND THE FROG

Let us leave

The ancient lord and lady of Marot
To their long night of woe, and turn to where
The fool and jester live their life apart.
Upon the western side, the castle wall
Runs out to guard a rocky spur, and here
Within the bend a roof is thrown across
To form a room and alcove underneath
That opens to the courtyard through an arch.
Within, the fool stands naked to the waist,
Although the desert wind of winter blows
An icy breath ; he feels it not, but tends
With loving touch a big-boned, piebald mare.
She squeals and kicks and makes a feint to bite
The hand that rubs her down. He coaxes with
A soft caress, then puts a blanket on,
And brings her corn and feeds her with his hands.
She wears no halter and the archway yawns
Without a bar, yet never does she wish
To gain her freedom, but with full dark eyes
Of love she watches him. And mere pretence

Her playful wildness, for at word and sign
She meekly lays her limbs upon the straw.
Her master laves his hands and face, and throws
A cloak across his ample shoulders bare,
And all the while within his throat he makes
A curious humming sound which oft the wind
Will raise in moaning round a ruined tower.

Inside the alcove, by a charcoal fire,
The jester sits and cooks the simple meal
Of bread unleavened, curried meat and rice.
“These priestly regulations,” grumbles he,
“Are wondrous strange, that let a Mongol waif
Cook food for one of royal Rajput blood.
His lordly brothers would not touch the bread
I handle, save to spurn it with their feet.
But he is mad and therefore anything
Is good enough for him. My chief,” he stood,
And bowing to the floor, he cried, “The meal
Is ready. Please Your Highness, eat.” The fool
Threw off his cloak, and sat him on the ground,
His chest and shoulders stripped, and when the food
Was brought, he ate it savagely in gulps
And mouthfuls huge, and champed and tore the meat,
More like a starving wolf than human man.
And having eaten all there was to eat,
He drank a draught of water cold, then rose

And washed again his hands and face, and donned
A robe, and lounged full-length upon a couch.

“’Tis strange,” the jester thought, “how like a hog
He eats, and yet in person he is clean
And neat as any gently-nurtured prince.”
The humming noise began again, and then,
“Hast noticed, Mendak, that I am not made
As other men?” “’Tis very true, my lord.”
The Frog, as though indignant at the slights
His master all unconscious aye received
From his own kin and people of the town,
Was careful to display respect profound
For his mad charge by every act and word.
“’Tis very true, my lord, and more than once
I’ve noticed it.”

The prince went on, “For long
I’ve thought the matter o’er. In strength and skill
Of hand and limb, all men I do excel.
And as the body, so the mind. I am
In long advance of this poor foolish age,
And therefore do not rightly understand
Their ways and customs strange. They walk so slow,
Where I do leap and run. In this I am
The better man. They give some silly bits
Of useless gold and silver in exchange
For honest bread and meat. Surely a child

Should be above such folly, yet their wise
And learned spend whole days in counting gold
And tying it in bags. But chiefly this
I marvel at. On hearing certain words
That bear no meaning to a world like mine
Above the common run, they laugh until
The tears roll down their cheeks. I never laugh.
Why should I? If I feel excess of joy
I run or ride or leap. This habit strange
Of laughter, I have shrewdly watched in men,
And yesterday, when riding o'er the plain,
I took some pains to teach myself the trick.
It was not difficult. The stomach jerks,
The lips go up like this, the eyes half shut,
And sounds come out as if a dying pig
Said ha, ha, ha, or he, he, he. I'll show
Thee how 'tis done."

He bared his gleaming teeth,
In grin as fixed and stolid as a mask's,
And made a cachinnation weird, that sent
The jester hopping round the room with hands
Shut tight upon his ears. "What is it, Frog?
Art thou in pain or dost thou copy me
In leaping thus to show thy joy?" Replied
The dwarf, "'Tis joy that I can scarce restrain
In hearing this Your Highness' firstborn laugh."

“And it shall be the last.” The jester heaved
A sigh of gratitude. “To me it seems
A fashion only fools would follow long.
Explain to me, my Mendak, if thou canst,
Why men do laugh when thou dost utter words
Of senselessness.”

The Frog rejoined, “My lord,
I am the royal jester, and as such
Of some renown for jests and gamesome japes.”
“All this I’ve heard before, but tell me pray
What is a jest?” The mannikin drew close
His brows in thought. “Now heaven help me,
how

Can I weigh down the airy witty sprite,
That his dull mind may seize and understand?
My lord, a fair ensample oft will clear
The path to comprehension. Shouldst thou call
For sugar to make sweet a dish of plums,
And I did give thee salt, ’twould be a jest,
As men of common run do understand.”

“And would this be a jest of merit great?”
The jester made a wry grimace. “I would
Not rank it ’mong the best that I have made,
But still without a doubt, it is a jest.”
“And should I laugh thereat? Methinks my mood
Would nigher go to smite thee on the head.”

“Nay, nay, but the onlookers. When I played
This very jest on our fat chief of Rukh,
The court was in a roar.” “And didst thou join?”
“I did, but first I got me out of reach
Of Rukh’s long arm.”

Again the humming noise
Went drumming on. “I cannot understand.
The lie thou actest, though it gives me pain,
Arouses mirth in those who call themselves
My friends. This is not sanity, but goes
To prove, what I have long suspected, that
Most men stand perilously near the bound
’Twixt reason and stark lunacy. They feel
I know their state, and hence it is I have
No friends save only thee. And Time—this is
Another of their riddles. Once I asked
A learned priest to tell me ‘What is time.’
He said, ‘It was the space ’tween hour and hour.’
And ‘What’s an hour?’ I asked. ‘A portion small
Of time,’ the fool replied, and could not see
That he was turning in an endless round.
They can’t explain, because it is a thing
Of fancy not of actual fact; and so
If time does not exist, the present, past,
And future all are one, and this our life
Is an eternal present. Takest thou me?”

The jester bowed. "My lord has spoken truth.
As hawks outsoar the sparrows, so his words
Of wisdom fly above the common run."
And as the humming recommenced, he said
To his own breast, "His wisdom's of a sort
At once the wisest and the maddest e'er
Conjoined in mortal head. And 'twere not that
His brain received this twist calamitous,
He'd be a man of noblest parts, but now
The stately pillar broken lies for fools
To wipe their shoes upon."

The humming ceased,
When spoke the prince. "These men moreover
pass

Their days and nights in fear. They tremble at
Their very shadows thrown upon a wall.
They all do fear, some more, some less, and aye
The more-afraids pay honour to the less.
I know not fear, a phantom made of air,
Preceding death and pain, and also these
Are unrealities and born of mind,
Not real things, the shadows of a shade.
Are they a fitting cause to thrill my frame
And make my pulses leap? I know not fear,
And therefore am exalted above those
Who dread its power."

The jester gave a grin.

“Indeed Your Highness knows not fear, but still
To-day when we did revel in the court,
And suddenly thou did'st observe thy sire
And mother were spectators of our game,
The imitation that Your Highness gave
Of fear was so exact one scarce could tell
The copy from the model.” Long and loud
The wind went humming round the broken tower.
“My mother is an angel wondrous fair.
No woman has nor ever had a face
So beautiful.” The Mendak could not check
A chuckle of contempt. Behind his hand
His lips were pouted in derision. Both
Grimace and mocking laugh were seen and heard
By those quick eyes and ears, and with a bound,
As swift and supple as a panther's spring,
The prince was on him, seized him by a leg,
And swung his body up in act to dash
His head against the wall. The mannikin
With Mongol stoicism made no sound,
But looked upon his death with steady eye.
When suddenly the startled mare stood up,
And whinnied almost with a human tone.
Prince Kumbho stayed his hand, and threw the
dwarf,

A panting atom of humanity, upon
The couch.

“Thou didst not blench, and Lallu there
Has begged thy pardon. Know thou never wert
So near to death !” He went and soothed the mare,
And patted her with many a loving word,
Until she laid herself again to rest ;
And then he fell to walking up and down,
And now the wind about the ruined tower
Was moaning like a disembodied ghost
Around its ancient haunts. “They are my gods.”
He waved his arms in gesture passionate.
“All good, all powerful ! They gave me birth.
Through them alone I live my happy life
Upon this beauteous earth. And all I have
I owe to them, and in return I am
A worthless clog, unlike my fellowmen,
Not wanted in this world, a useless limb,
And better for the body if ’twere lopped
And buried deep. And yet he honours me,
My sire, at times by taking me to war,
And graciously allowing me to fight,
And e’en defend his royal person with
My feeble arm. The kingly majesty
Of his strong face doth hold me aye in awe,
But ’tis not fear, for of no living man

Am I afraid. My mother——” here he beat
Upon his breast. “From that dim past which is
The present, I have ever known her face
Surrounded by a halo like the moon’s
Upon a wintry night, most beautiful,
And yet most cold and stern. I told thee lies.
I do know fear. I fear my mother’s face.
The look she casts on me is like a sword
Of ice that threatens, and I am afraid
With deadly fear.”

He came and sat him down
Beside the dwarf. “These gods we worship are
Most powerful and kind. ’Tis very strange
They do not love the creature they have made.
They’re kind and good, but not one gleam of love ;
And I would spend my heart’s last drop to do
Their bidding.” Quick he turned, and as he bent
To pat the sleeping steed, a jewel fell
To rest a moment on her flowing mane.

The jester cleared his throat. “My lord, the night
Is passing and ’tis time to rest.” The prince
Turned back submissively and stretched himself
Upon the bed. A weary sigh or two,
The ghostly wind began to hum again,
But sleepily, and slowly died away.

VI

"A ROYAL BED FOR ME!"

The dwarf blew out the lamp, and stepping soft,
He stole outside, where court and castle, tower
And crag were flooded by the silver light
Of a full moon. The air was freezing cold.
And drawing tight his goatskin coat, he sat
Cross-legged against the wall. His yellow face
And slanting eyes upturned, his hands about
His hairless cheeks, he looked an imp of ill,
A goblin of the night. "Poor simple fool,"
He murmured to himself. "Thy mother loathes,
Thy sire contemns and pities, while thy kin
Deride thee with a bitter scorn, and though
In spite of all, now that our doddering chief
Grows near his dotage, thou art by a league
The best man in the realm. The old she-wolf,
He thinks her beautiful, who has a skin
Of wrinkled leather like an aged ape's,
A bearded chin and toothless gums. Poor fool!
Yet happy in his folly! It behoves
Me'ware those mumbling jaws. Though ne'er a tooth,
They'd snap my head off did they find a chance.

I hate this evil brood of desert thieves,
And wer't not built of stone, I'd burn their keep
About their ears. Yet something I have done
To push the hopeful heirs into the mire.
The sin-instructor I of fair Marot,
A doctor in the art of pleasant vice,
With pupils more than apt to tread the road
That leads them to the pit. And those grey wolves
Know not their cubs have cut their wisdom teeth.
I'll find a day to lighten them, and then
Shall fall a cataclysm dread, will rend
Their upstart dynasty to splinters small.
Meanwhile I bide my time, and, for it makes
The she-wolf rage with fury impotent,
I ever urge the fool to cut his pranks
Before the public eye. It pleaseth him.
Poor prince, he takes the people's scoffs and jeers
For admiration of his strength and skill.
I love him for his brave simplicity,
And as he said, I am his only friend.
And friendlessness is oft the strongest bond.
Though truth to say, his friendship's soft caress
Went nigh to break my skull. Who would have thought
He'd be so quick to wrath ? " The dwarf here grinned,
And rubbed his leg, and felt his bullet head.
" But what a laugh ! Dear heart, it almost shook

My frame disjointed. Thank the Lord, it is
His first and last and only one."

He rose,
And shook his fist against the silvered towers.
"My curse upon the Riever. Why did he
Spare me alone of all my tribe? To live
His royal ape, and cut fool capers? that
His majesty might smile and bless the gods
He was not born a crooked thing like me?
But he shall rue the day. What said the witch
Of Gaya?" Here the little man puffed out
His chest in attitude of regal state.
"That I should lie upon a royal bed."
He strutted up and down. "The meaning's plain.
If on a royal bed, I shall be king.
Beware, ye wolves! Ye have your master here."

He swaggered with the fierceness of a chick
Just issued from the egg, but soon his mood
Was changed. "This hate is hungry work. The wind
Has ground my appetite to razor edge.
Where is the revel? In the goldsmith's house.
The smith bedrugged to blissful ignorance,
And his frail wife—well, well, young blood must aye
Run warm. Those dancing wenches too——" He stayed
And listened for a moment at the arch,
Then trotted off across the moonlit court.

The silent castle and the sleeping town,
The chamber where the aged couple mourned,
The stable of the fool, the goldsmith's house,
The shameless orgy and the revel wild—
The moon looked down on all with placid face,
Inanimate as carven deity
Who turns his marble eye expressionless
Upon his worshippers.

The morning star
Lay glinting like a diamond on the waste
Of desert wide, when to the archway rolled
The little mannikin with lurching gait.
The mare stood nibbling gently at her hay,
And recognising not the furry ball
Of drunkenness that strove to clutch her tail
To steady its gyrations, lifted heel,
And sent the jester flying through the arch.
He fell into the gutter, turned him o'er,
And muttering, "A royal bed for me,"
He closed his eyes and slept the happy sleep
Of drunken blessedness.

VII

NEWS OF WAR

An hour before

The crystal spear-point of the sun gave hint
Of dawn, the Rani Sonaldevi rose,
And hung a curtain on the window frame ;
And when the sun rode high in all his pomp,
The night yet lingered in the darkened room,
The Rawal slept exhausted by his grief,
The dawn had come, her sons were still alive.
At last she raised a corner of the blind,
And looking on the desert, watched the lines
Of sheep and camels winding o'er the plain
To browse on scanty herbage, hidden roots,
Or bush of thorn. A little cloud of dust,
And through it comes a camel trotting swift,
The serpent neck stretched forward, bobbing head,
The legs in giant stride like piston rods
Swinging in rhythmic beat, the padded hoofs
Just winnowing the sand. Her quick eyes see
And recognise a desert racer urged
To fullest speed. The rein is dangling loose,
And coming to the city wall, the steed
Of his own will arrests his wild career.

The rider's head is drooped. A stout thong holds
His body to the saddle-tree. The guard
Turn swiftly out. The grumbling camel kneels.
The rope is loosed. The limp frame laid at length,
And wine is poured between the bearded lips.
The rider starts to life, and tells a word
Of thrilling news that draws an angry roar
From those who stand beside. They lift the man,
And in a slow procession bring him up
The steep hill-side, and to the castle gate,
And here again the angry roar runs round.
The soldiers seize their arms and ferment seethes
Throughout the busy court.

“What noise is this?”

The watcher turned—the voice was at her ear—
And saw the Rawal standing by her side.
“The sun some two hours risen. Why did I
Not wake at dawn? If memory serves me right,
I had some work of import to perform
At dawn.” He read her face with one quick glance,
Then drew his hand across his eyes. “The boys!
I mind it now, and by this poor device
Thou strovest to prolong their wretched lives.”
He drew the curtain, threw the window wide,
And looked upon the bustle in the court.
“’Tis news of war, I doubt.” His fierce eyes gleamed,

And bristled his moustache. "I smelt its breath
But yesterday, and rarely am deceived."

The wind of morn blew cold, and suddenly
His racking cough attacked the aged chief,
Who choked and barked and gasped, until his face
Grew black, and bursting seemed the knotted veins
Upon his forehead damp. The anxious crone
Could nothing do save wring her bony hands ;
And when the fit was passed, the Rawal sank
Upon the bed, a bankrupt almost reft
Of life's good currency. "Another turn,"
He whispered to the queen, whose arms held up
His grizzled head. "Again the Shukr Khan !
Another twist to his keen blade, and thou
Hadst lost thy chief. The villain fears to meet
Me in the realm of shadows, so forebore.
But he will kill me yet and soon."

The noise

Outside grew louder. "Send and ask what news
Doth make the turmoil in the court." The queen
Passed out and soon the sound of shuffling feet
That bore a load, approached the chamber door.
It opened and they brought the wounded man
And laid him down before the chieftain's couch.
"Thy story quick." The man spoke faint and low,
And sometimes groaned and pressed a languid hand

Upon his side. "At Dhuniapur the foe,
A Moslem host, made sudden onslaught, we
Were taken by surprise. The town and fort
Are lost." The Rawal fiercely spoke, "And where
Was Beri Sal, my captain of the fort?
And if he lives——" "He's dead by now," the man
Went on. "'Twas treachery. The sentries slept
Bedrugged. Our men were butchered in their sleep.
The captain and some hundred of our best,
We cut our way across their girdling line;
And for that I was wounded to the death
And yet might live some hours, they tied me firm
Upon a camel swift, to bring the news."
"And where are they who lost my fort and town?"
"Best ask the carrion crows. I left them girt
By half a thousand Turks. No hope was theirs."
"And who is he who led the Moslem horde?"
"'Tis Kalu Shah, the Multan chief." "But he
Is dead. I slew him with these hands ten years
Ago." "It is his son of the same name."
The voice trailed off to incoherence, ran
A flurry through his frame, his head fell back.
The messenger lay dead.

"Go, take him hence!

And honour him with every fitting rite.

The man was brave. But as for Beri Sal,

'Tis well for him the crows, not I, performed
His obsequies." The little band passed out,
And bore the dead away.

VIII

THE LEADER OF THE VAN

Remained behind
Bahadur Singh, the leader of the van,
An old man, very tall and thin, loose-limbed,
Long-armed, and upright as a lance of steel.
The chief turned to him. "What hast thou to
say?"

The soldier cried, "We've twenty thousand men
Within the fort and town. But give the word,
And I will make some widows in Multan
Before the morning breaks." The Rawal asked,
"What force is theirs?" "'Twill be a plundering
raid,

Ten thousand at the most." "And riding hence,
Say that I wish to parley with the foe,
When would we see thy troop again?" A look

Of 'wilderment appeared upon the face
Of old Bahadur. "Dhuniapur from here
Is thirty miles. We would return to-night."
The Rawal said, "I pray thee wait awhile
Within the antechamber. We must march
With care and caution. Leave me now to think."

The old man strode away, but when he passed
The door, he shrugged his shoulders with an air
Of sad surprise. "His brain is weakening.
What talk is this of parley with the foe?
And care and caution? 'Tis this pestilent peace
Has made our chief a puling woman weak.
Five years ago, and now we should have been
Half-way to Dhuniapur, with bloody spurs
And loosened reins, and straining each his best
To pass the other, while the chief would ride
The foremost. None could say the Rawal's steed
Had seen their horses' tails. Had I my way
We'd ban for aye this soul-destroying peace,
And ever keep old war our comrade tried."
And moodily he paced about the hall.

IX

PARDON

The Rawal lay at length upon the couch,
Plunged deep in heavy thought. The Rani eyed
Him wonderingly. Like old Bahadur Singh,
She looked to see the flame of battle leap
Into his aged eyes, to hear his shout
Of "Horse, to horse," and hoped that war might bring
Reprieve to those she loved. Instead, he made
Delay, and talked of parley with a foe
Unbeaten, insolent. Was this decay
Of mind? A touch from death's forewarning hand?

At length he asked, "And dost thou love them dear?"
In spite of war's alarms, he knew she held
To one thought only. Swift the answer came,
"I love them more than any living thing,
Save thee alone, my chief." The Rawal sighed.
"I read thy secret clear. Thy love for them
Is greater than thy love for me." The queen
Cried with a sob, "Not now, but yesterday,
May God forgive a mother's doting heart,
I do confess my idols stood between
My love and thee." "Ay, ay," the chieftain sneered,
"'Tis easy thus to talk of love, but how

Wilt prove its depth? Art thou prepared to die
To save these ingrates from the death they've earned?"
"And gladly," cried the crone with quavering voice,
Her rheumy eyes alight with the first ray
Of hope. The threat of death to her was naught
But idle jest. Already he had tuned
His heart to mercy. "Gladly would I die
To save the lads," she said. "One foolish speech
Cannot destroy the memory of those years
When love and loyalty went hand in hand.
And what are life and death compared to love?"

The old man held his old wife in his arms,
And took her chin, all bearded as it was
He did not notice, turned her wrinkled face
Up to his own and looked into her eyes,
As if he were an ardent lover still,
And she a beaucous maid. "My child, this love
Maternal is a wondrous thing, that fears
Nor pain nor death. I do believe thy word
That thou wouldst die to save the worthless fools.
For me, I loved the elder with a blind
Unreasoning passion. But no time was there
That I would die for him. A leg or arm
I might have given." By ghastly gaiety
He strove to hide the wound that would not heal.
"An arm perhaps, though not the right that wields

My trusty sword. But not my life, no, no,
The bargain's too uneven. Kiss me, sweet !
Thou hast thy wish. The men, thy sons, are free.
I pardon them." The Rani's happy cry
Was like an echo of her girlish days.
She said no word, but clung in dumb embrace
Of thankful joy about her husband's neck.
At last he pushed her gently. " Go, my queen !
Let us not waste the fleeting hours ! We're old.
Our days are few. This one may be the last."

X

THE EMBASSY

He rose and striding to the anteroom,
He found Bahadur chafing at delay,
And restless as a tiger newly caged.
His chief spoke short and stern. " Thou'lt take two men,
And start at once for distant Dhuniapur.
Thou shouldst arrive at noon. I will despatch
Relays of camels for thy homeward ride.
At sunset we expect thy swift return."

“ But on what embassy ? ” Bahadur cried.

“ My king, who carved this desert realm, and holds
It now within the hollow of his hand,
Whose path for twenty years has upward led
Ever to victory, thou wilt not speak
With Moslem infidels unless to spurn
Them cringing at thy feet ? ”

The Rawal touched
His sleeve and leading to the balcony,
He whispered his commands. The captain's eyes
Were opened in amaze. “ My king, I pray
Thee pardon my presumption, but—— ” “ But what ? ”
The chief rejoined, and with a gesture kind,
His hand caressed the old man's arm. “ Dost thou
Not wish to go ? I fear I overtax thy powers.
We're growing old. And twenty leagues perchance—— ”
“ Not so, my lord. I keep my stripling's strength.
Like seasoned wood, my body harder grows
With age, and fifty leagues would not o'ertire
This toughened frame. But if a servant old
And faithful might presume to speak, I'd beg
Thee reconsider—— ” “ Peace,” the chieftain's voice
Rose harsh and stern. “ I do not seek advice.
I give commands. Do thou at once obey ! ”

At the rebuke, the soldier bent his head,
Then silently saluting, turned on heel,

And strode away to do his mission strange.
“And faith,” he muttered. “What a fool was I
To try to bend a rock. A habit half
A century in age, cannot be changed
Upon the instant. Should he wish to yield,
The custom of a lifetime would compel
Him to enforce his will. I made mistake.
No weakening here. He has not frowned nor
raised
His voice to me since that old time at Barl,
When I presumed to charge without his word.
Two score of years ago. How time doth fly !
It seems but yesterday. God knows, I thought
My latest hour had come. A man of men !
I ne’er have met his match. And as through life
I’ve followed him, I’ll follow him to death.
This world would be a poor affair without
My gallant chief. No place for me !” By this
He reached the courtyard, chose his troopers twain,
And camels of the Bikaneri breed,
And looking from her lattice, Sonaldevi
Perceived him strike across the plain the way
The messenger had come, and riding swift
In single file, she watched the little troop,
Until it disappeared beyond the line
Where sky and desert meet.

Her joy was great.

In that her guilty sons were given reprieve,
But still no muster of the force, no call
For steed and lance ! Instead, the day's routine
Of state affairs went calmly on, as if
No Moslem insolence had knocked upon
Their border gate. By every sign she knew
A mystery lay hid, and ill at ease
And restless, went all day from room to room,
With just a little dread about her heart.

At noon the Rawal's embassy drew rein
Upon a rise that overlooked the town
Of Dhuniapur, now nothing but a heap
Of blazing ruins. On the fort's high tower
The Moslem pennon flew. Outside the wall
The busy foe had pitched their camp, and built
A bank and ditch as safeguard from assault.

Bahadur gazed awhile, then forward rode,
When suddenly a troop of Tartar horse
Came on them at the gallop. "Who are ye?"
The leader fiercely asked. "To lie is death."
"We come on embassy unto your chief,
From one they style the Rawal of Marot.
I speak the truth, but cannot hope that ye
Will recognise a thing ye seldom use."
The leader scowled. "A syllable from me

Would slit thy jesting throat from ear to ear.”
The Rajput flicked a fly from off his sleeve.
“I pray thee say it. Ere the change of moon,
Three thousand Moslem throats in sympathy
Would gape in smile as broad, a fair exchange
For one old life.” The Tartar growled an oath.
“Bring them before our general, Kalu Shah.
Where if he doth not curb his tongue, I doubt
’Twill be because he has no tongue to curb.”

Thus rode they to the camp, the Rajputs cool
As if returning from a pleasure jaunt,
The Moslems fretting like a dog on leash
Who sights a stately stag. Outside the tent
The general sat upon a cushion huge.
A man of thirty summers, in the prime
Of manly strength. His manner rough and frank,
The open handsome face and ready laugh
Gave promise of a nature chivalric
And brave to hardihood, wer’t not for eyes
Whose shifty glance bade one beware of guile.
The Tartar told his tale, the general frowned.
“Forsooth, a bold and ready tongue. Methinks,
We’d give it wider scope for use, did we
Uproot it from thy jaws.” Bahadur smiled,
As man will do who caps another’s jest.
“The Rawal of Marot, a desert chief

Not altogether unknown in these parts,
Has sworn upon the sacred Ganges stream,
That should his messengers, unharmed and safe,
Return not by the set of sun, he'll take
Of Moslem heads three thousand toll, and burn
Multan, thy city, to the level ground."

"Multan is distant, and thy tongue is near."

"And yet I've heard the Rawal's lengthy arm
Did stretch so far ten years ago. Thy sire
Perchance has told thee; though without a head
He may have found it difficult to speak."

The Moslem frowned, then broke into a laugh.

"Cry quits," he said. "We've rashly pushed our raid
Into the dog-wolf's lair. Behoves us go
With wary step lest we should lose our skins.
I know thy Rawal. Who does not? He's one
Loves not delay. The wounded wolf will spring
Before the spear is dry. We looked to see
Thy van come o'er yon rise two hours ago.
Get on, man, quick, and tell thine embassy!"

Bahadur coughed and drew himself erect.

"My lord and master, Rawal of Marot,
A soldier tried by half a hundred years
Of war, with whom the god of victory
Has sojourned like a well-beloved friend,
Who for five weary years has found no foe

To look him in the eyes, is stricken by
A mortal malady in his old age,
And willing not to die a woman's death
Inglorious in his bed, has ordered me,
The leader of his van, to wait upon
The famous Moslem chieftain, Kalu Shah,
To beg that of thy gracious favour thou
Wilt grant him the Yuddan."

"And what is that?"

The general asked. "The sack of Dhuniapur
Is not the sort of kindness that should lead
A man to crave for further favours, least
Of all thy wily Rawal of Marot."

"It is the gift of battle to the death,"

Bahadur Singh replied. "A Rajput rite
Of ancient times, long fallen to disuse."

"Nay, if he wants to fight, why, let him come,
We'll feed him to the full. 'Tis strange that he
Should ask as favour what ere now he aye
Has taken with both hands." "Of yore he fought
For victory, and seldom failed to find
The thing he sought. But now 'tis death he seeks,
Death by a foeman's hand in open fight,
That he hereafter unabashed may take
His seat in Suryaloca among the gods,
Beside his warrior sires, who one and all

Died sword in hand and faces to the foe.
If thou wilt of thy kindness grant this boon,
Half-way to Dhuniapur a hamlet lies,
Kerore by name. To-morrow when the sun
Has climbed three hours into the eastern sky—
The blood of aged men creeps slow, they need
Some warmth to thaw their veins—my chieftain old
Will meet thee at Kerore, and bring with him
Five hundred only of his ancients, all
Old soldiers, who have followed him, their lord,
Since they were boys, and who would follow still,
To share their sovereign's triumph with the gods.
What sayest thou? The Rajput and the Turk
Have played together oft the joyous game
Of battle to the death. He slew thy sire,
Whose blood is unavenged. Wilt hold the cup
Unto the Rawal's lips? I warrant he
Will drain it to the dregs and spill no drop."

A murmur of amazement ran through all
The Moslem crowd, and Kalu Shah himself
Astonished stood. "Is this the naked truth?
I've heard queer tales of his diplomacy,
To call it by no harsher name. His fault
Alone, if we find credence in his faith
No easy task. Thy band of ancients, viewed
On closer terms, may shed their years, as I

Take off my cloak, and turn like fairy elves
To chosen warriors in their golden prime.
Or else thy greybeards may indeed retain
Their weight of years, and yet be only bait
To lure our guileless selves into a trap,
And, fighting with your dotards, we shall see
The desert travail with portentous birth
Of twenty thousand riders and their steeds."

The Rajput answered with a smile, "'Tis true,
The Rawal's nimble wits have won as oft
As his strong arm. Of the grim book of war
He is the master sage, whom none can teach
And from whom all do learn. In this howe'er
There is no ruse, no guile. We come prepared
To die, without our armour, but with sword
And spear alone, and riding our good steeds;
Five hundred aged men, and them behind
Two thousand bearers to bring back the dead
In honour for their final obsequies.
I'd swear by all my gods this is the truth,
But that ye'd laugh at empty words of one
Ye deem an infidel. I would remain
As hostage to be tortured limb by limb,
If these my words are proven false, but for
The Rawal's oath, and he is one fulfils
The smallest tittle of his plighted word.

Ye must e'en take or leave it without pledge
Or bond. To-morrow morn we ride beside
The town Kerore. If ye are there, we'll thank
Ye from our hearts. If not, the winged jest
Shall fly through all the land, and e'en your wives
Will call ye cowards who were feared to fight
The Rawal's band of dotards, old and weak."

Ensued a silence, while the general bent
His piercing eyes upon the Rajput's face,
Who met the gaze unflinching. Then he said,
"I do believe thy word. 'Tis passing strange,
But stranger have I seen in this mad world.
We grant the boon, and thank thy famous chief
For the honour he confers upon his foe.
We shall not fail to welcome thy brigade,
And speed them on their way to heaven and bliss.
And that no man may say we played the game
With loaded dice, our force shall not exceed
Thine own in numbers, difference only this,
Our men are young and wear their shirts of mail."
The Rajput bowed his first obeisance.
No tree could stand more straight and stiff than he
Had stood till now, and then with every form
Required by most punctilious courtesy,
He took his leave and went his homeward way.

"A warrior tempered like a blade of steel,

Cool, keen, and hard,” the Tartar general cried.
“ If we were starving and we boiled him down,
Our broth would be but iron bones and grit.
If I can read a man, he spoke the truth.
Natheless we will not count too curiously
Our men-at-arms, and if their numbers run
Some hundreds o’er the mark, ’twill be to do
The Rawal greater honour. In reserve
Will stand the whole remainder of our force,
A mile away behind some friendly hill.
Old Chachick never gave his trust to foes,
Then why should I ? ”

XI

“ *WHAT DOOM AWAITS ?* ”

Again the setting sun
Lay like a blood-red ball upon the sand,
And ’neath the battlements the aged pair,
The Rawal and his wife, paced slow their round.
They talked on trivial matters of Marot,
But frequent gaps of silence showed their thoughts

Were elsewhere. The Rani was the first
To mark Bahadur and his troopers twain
Come trotting o'er the waste, and pointing down
Her skinny finger, she exclaimed, "There rides
Thy messenger from distant Dhuniapur.
I marvel thou dost parley with the foe.
Thy spokesman aye has been thy sword, a tongue
Whose eloquence few foemen could resist."
He pressed her arm. "My wife has ever left
Affairs of state unto my guiding hand.
But questioning our king-craft, does she now
Rebel against her sovereign liege and lord?"
The Rani smiled, though wanly, at his jest.
"Thou knowest it is not so. The day has passed.
Thou hast not spoken to our erring sons.
No troop has marched against the insolent foe,
Who dare to flout us on our border line.
Instead, this peaceful mission armed with words
Goes out to offer terms and beg for peace.
'Tis most unlike thyself." His gesture stayed
Her speech. "My child, I've acted for the best.
A little while and thou shalt understand."

At this Bahadur rode into the court.
The Rawal called him and he climbed the wall.
"What says the foe?" "To all he does agree.
The place, Kerore; the time, midway to noon."

"'Tis well. I pray thee, hither send my sons,
The princes Rundhir Singh and Birsil Rao,
And tell the seneschal to give commands
To call a full assembly of my chiefs
In two hours' time within the audience hall."

Then as the soldier turned on heel to go,
The Rawal added, "With the princes send
A guard of six or eight to wait on me."

The captain whistled softly to himself.

"A fresh surprise. And have the spotless lambs
Mislaid their masks for once? 'Tis love that blinds,
Or never could they hoodwink one so shrewd."

"What means this summons?" asked the elder son,
As side by side the princes climbed the stair.

"My head is humming with our late carouse.
Dost think some hint of these our nightly pranks
Has come to our fond parents' foolish ears?"

"It may be so," the younger son replied.

"'Tis wonderful how blind and deaf their eyes
And ears have been to all our little sins.

Some sneaking spy perchance has played us false.

I've always had my doubts about the dwarf.

Fear not. 'Twill be a passing breeze. We'll weep,

And snivel our repentance, swear reform,

And in a trice will stand again on thrones

As idols to be worshipped by the world."

In truth they looked not unlike images
The faithful deck in gorgeous vestments, stiff
With gold and silver thread. Their dress was rich
With flower-embroidered silk and fine brocade.
Their hair and beards were sleek with perfumed oil.
Upon their fingers, ears, and necks, bright gems
Flashed rainbow-tinted light. Their eyes were bold
Their faces handsome, though the sensual lips
Betrayed the force of animal desire.
Their bodies overfat, and when they reached
The battlements, they paused and panted hard
To catch their failing breath, then swiftly went
To greet their parents waiting on the wall.
“What joy is ours,” cried Rundhir Singh, “at this
Unusual summons to attend our sire !
Unwonted yet most welcome ! For we live
But in the gracious sunshine of thy face,
And where it beams not, there the world is dark.”
Then Birsil Rao broke in to swell the tide
Of fulsome flattery which ne’er had failed
To wash away the memory of their sins.

The chief had nodded to their greeting. Now he stood
Silent and grim. The web of love’s own weaving
Was rent. His fierce eyes, undeceived, marked all,
The meanness, and the cunning, and the lies.
His queen took one step forward to embrace

And peradventure warn her erring sons.
 A glance from those hard eyes arrested her,
 And moving back, she downward drew her veil
 To hide her anxious face. "He promised me
 Their lives and pardoned them. Will he exact
 A penalty of pain or banishment ?
 Or is forgiveness free ? "

The princes' speech

Was checked in mid career. Behind their sire
 A guard was standing, armed with spear and sword.
 Their warmth of greeting met with no response,
 And one looked to the other questioning.
 They ne'er had seen their father's eyes so stern.
 A torch flared high, and moaned the winter wind,
 A breath of danger threatening as it passed.
 The old man watched them with a scornful smile
 Sardonic on his lips. The silence grew
 Nigh overwhelming to the veiled queen.
 "And will he never speak ?" And still he glared
 With glance of menace on his faithless sons,
 Until they dropped their eyes and craven fear
 Rang in their hearts a tocsin of alarm.

At last he spoke. "When next ye heap abuse
 E'en though it be but treason 'gainst your sire,
 Or calumny of her whom ye should hold
 As dear as life, I would advise ye find

A more secluded place than yonder wall.
I will not say whose ears o'erheard. I know
Your secret communings and loose desires.
Howe'er your bodies strut in raiment rich,
Your souls before me naked stand in all
Their vileness. Not a thought is hid. I know
Ye as ye are, disloyal sons, who could
No value find for the great wealth of love
A mother lavished from the treasury
Of her full heart. No sons were ever spoiled
And pampered fat with every luxury,
As ye by us, the purblind fools, who hoped
That if love sowed with bounteous measure, he
Would reap more plenteous harvest. Coward curs,
The lasting shame is ours that our sweet loves
Gave birth to low-caste abjects such as ye.
Foul dogs, deserving of a mongrel's death."

The elder put his hand upon his belt
Where hung a knife, and quickly forward stept.
But in a trice, and ere the footfall fell,
The old man's sword was flashing in his fist.
"Stand back," he cried, "or else I'll let the light
Into the inky blackness of your breasts!
'Tis well I called the guard, although this arm,
However old and withered, is a match
For half a dozen cowards such as these.

And why should I not pass their instant doom ?
For half a century I've ruled Marot,
And never man of mine has lived to boast
He raised a rebel hand against his chief.
I've trod my path straight forward, trampling down
The weeds and creepers 'neath my iron heel.
The tower stands high, its walls are somewhat bare.
Methinks a dangling ornament or two
Might well enhance the beauty of its lines.”

The voice was low but rasping as a saw.
The princes' knees were trembling, and they clutched
The battlement to borrow needed strength
From its hard ruggedness. The torch's glare
Showed faces wild with terror. Then the queen
Began to sob a cracked and querulous note,
And held her husband's hand in both her own.
The Rawal waited till her sobs grew still.
“ The mother whom ye scorned has begged your lives,
Which I have granted, yielding to her prayer.
And but for her your toes had danced above
On airy nothingness. Then down, ye worms,
And grovel at her feet ! ” He forced them kneel,
And kiss her garment's hem. “ Now creep away,
And hide your heads, and thank the gods ye have
The heads to hide ! To-night in full durbar
I will announce the doom I mete to sons

Like ye who nurse ingratitude. Now go !”

They slunk away. The soldiers who had seen
But not o’erheard the cause of strife, marched off
To spread a wondrous tale of how the chief
Had single-handed overthrown his sons,
Who sought to slay him in a private feud.

Awhile the aged couple silent stood.
At length the Rani said, “Thy voice was like
A levin brand. With infamy it seared
Their quivering flesh. I ne’er have heard it so.
The soldiers say the terror of thy voice
Is worth a thousand men, and hearing once,
I well believe it is no idle boast.”
“And was I overstern ?” “Thy words were whips.
’Twere almost better to have slain outright.”
A mirthless smile was on his lips. He said,
“The mother ever takes her bantlings’ part
Against their sire.” “What further punishment
Hast thou in store ?” “What further sayest thou ?
So far mere words and idle breath have been
Their meed. And when their graceless crime ’gainst thee
Come to my mind, I would my words could breathe
A pestilence to kill with lingering pain
The viperous brood who feed upon their dam.
And yet at thy request the men go free.
No further punishment awaits.” “What jest

Is this ?” “No jest, my queen. They have atoned.
’Tis meet we take them to our breasts again,
And heal their stricken hearts with recompence.”
She shuddered at his laugh but held her peace.

The princes in the court-yard spoke apart.
“What doom awaits ? Not death, or he had slain
Us where we stood ; but banishment, or worse,
A dungeon dark. For what ? Because as men
We could not eat the pap prepared for babes.
Our pranks at night are naught compared to those
The Rawal Chachick played in his wild youth,
If rumour speaks aright. And then our speech,
It was not wise, but are we to be damned
Because our tongues in private wag too free ?
What man would care to have his every word
Blown wide upon the public ear ? The spy,
Who is he ? Could the dwarf have served us false ?
If so, the villain shall not live, whate’er
Mayhap. And e’en if not, a secret thrust
Would not be wasted, if it lessened aught
The weight of evidence against ourselves.
See, there he watches with his yellow eyes.
He looks the spy in every lineament,
And fools were we to trust the Mongol imp.”
And so they railed in childish impotence,
While terror held their hearts with tightening grip.

XII

THE DURBAR

Two hours from sunset loud the trumpets brayed,
And beat the kettle-drums their jangling clash.
The gates swung wide, and slowly one by one,
The barons of Marot rode in their steeds.
Upon his cushion in the audience hall
The Rawal sat cross-legged, and as his chiefs
Advanced and salutation made, their king
Accorded each his right. To some he waved
His hand alone. He stood to greet the chiefs
Of higher rank, and for a favoured few,
He took three forward steps, and lightly laid
His cheek to theirs, while loud the heralds called
Each noble's sounding titles of renown.

When all were seated in their order due,
Which custom or their dignity required,
The Rawal from his cushioned throne thus spake :
“ It was by your strong arms and willing hands,
And something due to my own strength and skill,
I seized this desert realm and built it fair
And strongly walled to the four winds of heaven,
Not with vain brick and stone, but with brave hearts.
Red war has been our guest for two score years,

And at our banquets, faith, we did not stint
The ruby wine. Of boon companions, he
Was aye the best, although at time his jests
Smacked less of humour than of biting wit.
But now he's gone, and in his place sweet peace
Smiles o'er the land. And some there are complain
By this too constant, fixed, and rigid smile
She loses half her grace. Yet peace has brought
Security and quiet lives and wealth.
Whereas the riches that red war would throw
In heaps about our feet, took wings ere morn,
And flew to other climes, the wealth bestowed
By peace remains and gathers growing force,
And fructifies. Your Rawal thanks his chiefs
For ready aid and strenuous service through
These half a hundred years, for mutual love
And kindly fellowship. And now our work
Is done. The sun of life is near its setting.
'Tis time the labourer should take his wage
And rest."

He paused and through the silence ran
A whisper low. "What thing is this? What doth
He mean?" But soon he spoke again. "The time
Of rest is nigh. For two years past your king
Has suffered from a sickness which has pushed
Each weary day its fell approach more near

Life's citadel. The deadly worm has gnawed
Its cruel mole beneath the tottering wall.
And shall I wait until the breaches yawn ?
To die a whimpering coward in my bed ?
My sires have ever fallen in the strife.
The roar of war has been their requiem.
Their faces to the foe, they laid them down
Upon the sheaves their gory sickles reaped.
The furies of the battle bore aloft
Their souls in glory to the blest abode
Where sit the eternal gods in Suryaloca.
And shall your chief hang back in craven fear
And prove himself the bastard of his race ? ”

His coughing seized him but he fought it down.
The silence was like death. His voice had swelled
Into an echo of the trumpet tone
Which in his youth had driven his wavering line
To the last charge that won them victory ;
But now it sank into a whisper hoarse.
“ Our ancient foe, the Langas of Multan,
Have made a plundering raid on Dhuniapur.
Ye all have heard it, and because I failed
Of my old wont to answer blow by blow,
I doubt not many a winking hint went round
Of weakened brain, incipient lunacy ;
But ne'er was war more welcome, for his guise

Is that of skilled physician who will heal
My wounded breast. The leader of my van,
Bahadur Singh, I sent on embassy,
To beg the Tartar chief, young Kalu Shah,
To grant me the Yuddan, the precious gift
Of battle to the death. Our foe has given
Reply in terms of utmost courtesy,
According us the boon. Two hours before
To-morrow's dawn, I ride to meet my fate.
If there be any here, old friends and true,
Who wish to share a warrior's death with me,
Their ancient chief and comrade, let them come !
I warrant at the feast the Kalu spreads
There'll be enough of food and drink for all.
But if ye'd rather drag a few more years
Of well-earned ease and leisure in your homes,
Why, then, I ride alone."

The assembly sprang
As one man to its feet and shouted loud,
"We die with thee." But, when a pause ensued,
Was heard a thin, shrill, piercing cry that came
From where the women sat behind their screen.
The Rawal cast one rapid glance above,
But kept unmoved his features stern. He rose,
And leaning on his sword of state, he raised
His hand for silence.

“Comrades all, I knew,
Before I asked, the answer that ye’d give.
My stalwarts ne’er have played the laggard where
Their king has led, and will not now in this,
His last great fight. Then be it so. We meet
To-night outside the city’s northern gate.
My royal word I’ve pledged to bring no more
Than just five hundred men, and none with less
Than three score years to dim his eye and bend
His soldier’s back. Take sword and spear, but leave
Your helmets and your mail ! Let each man ride
His oldest steed ! The Shah hath promise given
To play the game like gallant cavalier,
And bring no more than equal hundred five,
Armed at all points. And, all our lives we’ve toyed
With death, who like a strumpet bold, has laid
Hot siege to our poor hearts, and times have been
When we were sorely put to it to keep
The wily jade from breaking our defence.
But now we go to woo her for our bride.
So let us ride as bridegrooms richly dressed.
We shall not find the wanton overcoy.”

The lords and lieges, young and old, had left
Their seats and stood in groups about the hall
In eager converse, when a man pushed through
The tumult loud to where the hoary king

Still leaned upon his sword. It was the fool,
Prince Kumbho Singh. He kissed his father's robe,
In supplication folded both his hands,
And cried, "My sire, I pray thee let me go.
This arm has often been thy buckler true,
And death must cross my body ere he touch
One hair on thy grey head." The old man spoke.
The poor fool thought his father's voice had ne'er
Been tuned so kindly. "Not this time, my son.
I go to meet my death, not to avoid."
"This death is wondrous strange. For all these years
My sire has striven to escape his clutch,
And now thou dost pursue. But will he flee
As thou hast fled from him?" "Not he. He'll stand
His ground." "Then does his aspect change? one day
A loathly form of terror, and the next
The features of a well-beloved friend?"
The king replied, "Through all our years of life
He is our friend. But, for his manner's rude,
And somewhat rugged seem his face and form,
We hold him off with all our strength and wit.
Though in the end his stern persistency
Of proffered love will conquer our regard.
We recognise him as he is, our best
And truest friend, and then right willingly
We yield our tired selves to his embrace.

The face which at a distance seemed so harsh,
On near approach transforms to beauty rare.
And as we sink to rest, a mother's hand
It is that soothes ; our last look falls upon
A mother's face."

Without a word the prince
Went moodily away, and at the door
He found the jester, drew the Frog aside,
And whispered in his ear, " My father says
That death's our truest friend, who at the last
Will soothe us with a gentle mother's hand.
Is death my mother ? Is my mother death ?
She gave me life, and hers without a doubt
The right to take her priceless boon away.
I marvel what he meant. Again he said,
Though death's face terrified, on near approach
It was of beauty rare. Why, this describes
In every word my mother's lovely face.
What thinkest thou ? The two, are they for me
But one ? " The jester shook his shaggy head.
" Too great the mystery for me to solve ! "
Then added to himself, " The ancient hag,
However duplicate she may appear
To him, her son, to me she's unity.
Thank God, she's not my mother ; but she'll be
My death, if e'er she find a goodly chance."

Meanwhile the Rawal raised his voice again.
“ I pray ye take your seats, while I set forth
The dispositions I have made of this
My kingdom of Marot. The princes twain,
Rundhir and Birsil Rao, for long have been
The main support of my declining years.”
His glance an instant rested on his sons
Who sat upon his right. They lowered their gaze,
And shifted ill at ease. A rumour wild
Of what the guard had seen had gone abroad.
The assembly breathless waited. “ Would the chief,
Whose will had never bent, show mercy now ?
Or would he send two heralds to announce
His advent to the misty further shore ? ”

The king went calmly on. “ My sons have been
My special charge. In gentle breeding, art
Of war and arms and statecraft, they have learned
Whate'er our subtlest masters knew to teach.
And well have they repaid my loving care.
To none more ably fitted to bear sway
Could I resign my reins of sovereignty.
My lords and captains, pay ye careful heed
To this my last and solemn testament.
Marot, with all its stretch of desert land,
Which lies to northward of the Gara hills,
I give to Rundhir Singh, to have and hold

As ruler absolute. The southern land,
With Baru as the capital, I grant
To Birsil Rao. The will to have effect
When my dead body vanishes in flame.
For dead or living, I am still the king,
While these poor flesh and bones encumber earth.
To-night, beside the gate I welcome those
Who choose to form my escort to the gods,
And there to all my people I will say
A last farewell."

He rose and gave the sign
Dismissing the durbar. The nobles went
In silence, with bent heads and gloomy eyes.
And here and there an ancient whispered low,
"The kingdom which we conquered, given o'er
To debauchees! 'Tis time we aged birds
Took flight to other spheres."

XIII

"WE'VE SINNED AND OUR SIN IS GREAT"

The Rawal placed
A hand on Rundhir's shoulder. Both the sons
Stepped back with guilty air. He only said,
"Come ye with me," and led them to the room

Of private audience, closed the heavy doors,
 Then turned upon them suddenly and asked,
 "What think ye of the doom I meted out?"
 The men seemed dazed and stupefied. They stood
 With hang-dog air, and spoke no syllable.
 At length the elder by an effort raised
 His head and with defiant look he cried,
 "'Tis all a farce, a devilish comedy,
 Arranged with fiendish skill to add a zest
 To the finale when thy minions jeer
 To see us dangling from the battlements.
 What's hid beneath, I cannot guess. But well
 I know 'tis all a mockery and cheat.
 The Riever Chachick has a name for guile,
 And crafty, cruel jests."

"And yet in this,"

The chieftain said, "I've spoken simple truth.
 I loaded ye with favours. Ye repaid
 My loving care with black ingratitude.
 I would have slain ye, but your mother begged
 Your worthless lives. To-morrow morn
 I go to seek my death from Tartar swords.
 This kingdom, which the right of conquest makes
 My own, I give ye freely. This is all
 The penalty I take, that, for a space
 Of two brief hours ye stood upon the verge,

And trembling saw death like a monster gape
His raging jaws beneath."

He spoke in tones

Whose measured gravity enforced belief.

And suddenly his listeners' strength gave way.

The hours he mentioned with so light a breath,

To them had been long ages of suspense.

The dread incertitude had sapped their force,

And now they hid their faces in their hands,

And, grown men though they were, they sobbed aloud,

And moaned, "We've sinned and our sin is great."

A gleam of joy and wonder shone beneath

Their father's hoary eyebrows. Soon it passed,

And once again the smile sardonic played

About his bitter lips.

"Nay, nay, ye've fooled

Me once too often. Let it go at this.

Ye may be honest in your penitence,

But I will not believe. No man shall say

He hoodwinked twice the Riever, him you call

The master of all guile. And now that love

Has ta'en his blinding bandage from my eyes,

I judge ye as I judge the outer world.

Ye shallow simpletons, no more can ye

Bemuse my dotting sight with dust of lies.

And now in parting, I will not bestow

A father's fond advice upon deaf ears.
Before ye lie two paths. The one leads swift
To early death and shame. The other gives
A promise of long life, and certainty
Of honour and respect with men and gods.
Debauch your lives with women, wassail, wine,
Loose-living, lies, deceit, and tyranny,
And ere the year is out these desert men,
Hard-bitten as their rocks, will cut your throats.
And so an end to this fair dynasty
I built with fifty years of patient toil.
But lead clean lives, be honest, brave, and true,
Respect yourselves and others, spend your days
In labour to uphold and fortify
This realm on the foundation I have laid,
And ye may live the fullest term of life
In happiness, and leave an honoured name
To after ages. Choose which path ye will !
'Tis your concern, not mine." His searching gaze
For one long space bent sternly on his sons.
Then without further speech he strode away.

The princes dried their eyes and sat them down
Upon a cushion in a deep recess,
And long remained in gloomy reverie.
Then Rundhir spoke, " What fools and dolts we've been.
What pigs who gorged on garbage in their sty,

What worms who fattened in their sensual mire,
And cared no whit to lead a nobler life."

"No use in vain regret, and lesser still
In empty railing," cried the younger son.

"Our sire has stripped the bleeding flesh of skin,
And shown us to ourselves in all our gross
Deformity. The scalpel which he used
Was cruel, keen, and dipped in vitriol.

But it has done its work, and I for one
Will show no wavering in the path I choose."

"Nor I," Rundhir replied. "Regret is vain.
Amendment is our only hope. The realm
Will drift to ruin when the guiding hand
Of our stern father leaves the helm of state,
Unless our 'prentice fingers seize the oar.
With fortune good and careful handling, we
May steer the ship in safety to the shore.
The chances are against, but if we stand
Aside in idleness, destruction yawns
Immediate in our path."

"And is there naught,"

The younger asked, "that we can do to show
Our penitence and win again their hearts,
Whose love we squandered as of little worth?"

"The Rawal's will is adamant. He ne'er
Will put his faith where he has been deceived.

But with our mother we may yet succeed
 In doing e'er so little to atone
 The hideous past. To-morrow when her lord
 Has left her widowed and forlorn, we'll strive
 To soothe the quivering wound with healing balm
 Of filial sympathy. When this our love
 Was mere pretence, it was her chiefest joy.
 If the poor shadow had the power to move,
 The substance should have virtue greater still."
 His brother sighed. "God grant it may! I was
 Her well-beloved, and, best of mothers, she
 Had but one fault, her love for me was blind."
 A vengeful look shone in the elder's eyes.
 He cried, "This Mongol dwarf has been our bane.
 Rememberest thou, my brother, ere he came,
 Our venial sins were those of giddy youth.
 'Twas he, the past professor of all ill,
 Who link by link enmeshed us in the chain
 Of body-killing, soul-destroying vice,
 My forward path turns sharply to the right,
 But at the bend a headless finger-post
 Shall mark the turning-point in my career.
 Thereafter ye may seek the Mongol Frog,
 But shall not find him in the haunts of those
 Who live and have their being." Then they arose
 And went their way with slow and halting step.

A furry ball uncoiled upon the floor,
And showed the Mongol's yellow lineaments.
" 'Tis well my ears are none too slow to hear,"
He muttered to himself. " Had I not caught
Two hours ago a glint of mischief near
From that fierce glance of hatred in the eyes
Of these my dupes and pupils, I had gone
All unsuspecting to my doom. But now
At least I am forewarned, though little use
The warning, if I have no power to act.
What said my hopeful? ' Headless finger-post.'
He meaneth me, preceptor kind and wise
Of pleasant vice. ' Tis thus he will repay
My learned lessons in licentious art.
The fool's my only refuge in the realm.
For brotherly affection is like God,
Oft mentioned, never seen. The three all hate
Each other. I must follow Kumbho Singh
Like his own shade. Perchance his brawny arm
May keep intact the head upon the post."

XIV

WHERE GRIEF, THE WATCHER, SITS

With faltering knees, the old man climbed the stair.
“My God,” he said and groaned. “How can I face
My wretched wife?” Awhile he stood in doubt
Upon the threshold of their chamber door—
The doubt looked more like dread—and then in haste,
As if he feared his courage, wide he threw
The heavy, brass-bound door and entered in.
The figure, crouched upon the bed, leaped up
And, running to him, threw her skinny arms
About his neck and clung to him and sobbed
Convulsively. He placed her on the couch
And sat himself beside his weeping wife.
His long, lean hand beat softly on her back,
But still he said no word.

“Ah, ruthless blow!”

The Rani cried amid her choking tears.
“Ye men, have ye no feeling, that ye can
Thus coolly set your scenes, and bide your time
For the dramatic moment to strike down
The hearts that love ye? Couldst thou not have given
Some hint of thy design, that the fell stroke
Might not have ta'en me wholly unprepared?”

The Rawal's husky tones were gentle as
A pleading lover's. "Listen, my dear child !
There was no other way. They are not boys, but men.
The tree is warped, and what was easy when
The tender sapling grew its bending shoots,
Is now impossible. The fault was ours.
We would not see the truth which patent lay
Observed by all, except the parents fond.
None told us. We would credence ne'er have given,
Not though a holy saint had staked his soul.
And had I freely pardoned them, they would
Have shown a mock repentance, shed a flood
Of wet hypocrisy down smirking cheeks—
I left them snivelling half an hour ago—
And turned them after to their lawless sports,
Their cunning sharpened by discovery.
Our trust unquestioning would then be changed
To sleepless-eyed suspicion, that perceives
A fault where there is none, and magnifies
The truth out of all semblance to herself.
Our lives would be a dreary round of doubt,
Enquiry, revelations fresh, false tears,
And oaths made to be broken. What would they,
My people, think, when I, their king, to cross
Whose will was certain death, who carved and held
The realm by force of resolution that

O'erode all obstacles, who never showed
Fool pity for delinquents or their crime,
Began to vacillate with daily change
Of weak-kneed purpose? What do conies think,
When the hard rock, 'neath which they shelter find,
Begins to split and crumble in decay?
Fierce factions soon would form within the state,
The younger generation 'gainst their sires,
Our sons against ourselves. The end would find
Us childless, or our offspring orphans made.
Our lives to theirs. Whichever won, the realm,
Disrupted by the hands which should have held
It firm and fast, would fall an easy prey
To the barbarian Moslem from the north.
I could have banished, but their advocate
Would ne'er have ceased her pleading to rescind
The stern decree. Their exile would be short.
And when returned, the end would be the same,
As if I'd given reprieve, their death or mine.
Remain the dungeons. Dost thou think their friend
At court would not have found within a month
A key to open every lock in all
The kingdom of Marot? Believe me, child,
My plan was best. There was no other way."

His old wife clung about him, as one sees
A withered trail of ivy clinging still

To a dead branch of oak. Her voice was thin
And shrill as a cracked reed that pipes its plaint
Beside a wind-swept tarn. " 'This morn thou saidst
The bargain was uneven, shouldst thou give
Thy life for theirs; and even as the speech
Was on thy lips, this plot was in thy mind,
Which gave thy words the lie." Her husband laughed
The veriest fleshless spectre of a laugh.
" In truth it is a jest to do the thing
At the same time when I was swearing hard
I would not do it. Yet no lies I spake.
To save the lads alone, I would not give
My life for theirs, e'en though my life is like
A broken bowl the housewife throws away.
To give thee joy, my sweet, I made this plot.
And then for terror that 'twould give thee pain,
One bitter drop within a cup of bliss,
I put off the announcement to the last."

The woman groaned. " A copper doit of joy
To what a wealth of pain ! " Her husband gave
A little start, and keenly bent his eyes
Upon his wife. " I granted both their lives."
" At what a cost ? " she cried. " What are their lives
Compared to thine ? I loved them once far more
Than thee, or thought I did, but that is past.
Take back thy gift, and give me what I prize

Above all earthly wealth." "My wife and queen,
Take goodly heed, I pray, to what thou sayest.
My life to theirs, no half-way house is here.
Put back the hand of time if 'tis thy will,
But know, the chief of yesterday was one
Who ne'er forgave. If he, thy husband, lives,
The lads, thy sons, must die."

She bent her head,
Her nervous fingers twitched. The strife was short.
She looked up bravely with her tear-dimmed eyes.

"Give me thy life," she begged. "Consider well,"
Again he urged. "One life to two, my own
Is broken. I shall never see the spring.
The Shukr Khan will grudge one month at most.
And they are in their prime, with thirty years
Of life to come." She only wailed again,
"Give me thy life! One month, one week with thee
Is worth the total of the wastrels' lives.
A change has come o'er this." She struck her breast.
"I cannot understand, can scarce believe,
But when thou didst proclaim thy dread design,
My heart gave one great bound, and then I knew
The wife in me was stronger than the mother.
It may be sin, desire unnatural,
But I would freely sacrifice their lives
To purchase thine."

The Rawal paced the room

With long and rapid steps. "I never guessed
The truth," he cried. "How could I guess?" His face
Was lit with radiant joy. "The bride adores
The bridegroom, but when childish hands and lips
Go feeling round her breast, they push aside
The husband fond. But here I kept my place.
No victory of mine so great as this.
Thy wish is granted, O my queen." And then
He paused, and staggering, struck his brow. "Too late,
Too late," he moaned. She ran to him,
And asked. "What is it, husband mine?" "Too
late,"

He said. "My joy made me forget, but now
I cannot take a step would smirch my honour,
Engulf my fame in one long scornful shout
Of mockery, derision, and contempt.
My embassy and speech and testament
Are steps irrevocable, leading straight
To death. Thou wouldst not have me retrograde,
To live the shameful butt of infidels,
And every ribald fool in this my realm?"

The stillness of the room was broken by
The aged queen's low whimper of despair.
"Yes, I must keep the rendezvous," the chief
Went on. "Thou wouldst not have the Kalu Shah

Proclaim me coward through Rajwarra wide?
I spoke of my forefathers dying in
The battle's front, and how I longed to go
The path they trod, and did I now draw back
My very chiefs would shun me as I passed,
And turn their heads and spit in contumely.
And after all, 'tis nothing. Strife to me
Is like a holiday to boys at school,
And death is but a gate to life beyond.
It grieves me that the last request my wife
Prefers, I cannot grant. But cheer thy heart.
Thy sons remain. Perchance unfettered rule
Will found their characters on nobler base,
And thou mayest spend long years of quiet joy,
Watching their good increase, their evil fade,
And now and then a fleeting thought thou'lt find
For thine old husband who has gone before."

The Rani answered with a faint caress.
"What said I yesterday? That when thou goest,
I will not stay behind. To-morrow eve
I clasp thy body on the funeral pyre.
Our souls shall upward ride upon the same
Dark cloud of smoke." The Rawal started up.
"It shall not be," he cried. "I will renounce
The plan I made, and let the fools laugh loud.
They shall not laugh for long at Chachick Rawal.

And let the lads go free. I will do all
And everything, but thou shalt not breathe out
Thy loving soul in torment through the fire."

And now it was the Rani's turn to use
His words against himself. "Thou canst not soil
The fame which fifty years of sovereignty
Have built for thee. Thine honour is more dear
To me than this poor spark of life encased
In wasted skin and flesh. I would not men
Should mock at my great lord, and call him coward,
Because he saved his wife a passing pang.
It cannot be. 'Twere wholly infamous.
The honour of thy name's the chief account.
My life's a cipher. Clearly do I see,
So miserably has fortune bungled all,
That thou, my king, must go to meet thy doom.
Alas the grim necessity, but when
Thou'rt gone, thy wife impatiently will wait
For that glad moment when the kindly fire
Will give her sweet release to join her lord
In Suryaloca."

The chieftain said, "I know
It is our ancient custom for the wife
To burn alive upon her husband's pyre.
A ghastly heritage of savage times
To ensure due sorrow for a brutal mate

Or guard the man's life from a faithless wife.
No force, howe'er, save her own will compels
The wife to give her body to the flame.
'Tis wholly optional." The queen rejoined,
"No force save love and honour. These are powers
Will from his orbit bend the rolling sun.
Thine honour bids thee go, and love compels
Me follow thy bright footsteps to the stars.
We must obey."

The Rawal's thin frame shook
As with an ague fit. "And must it be?
I see thy dear flesh withering in the fire!
Oh horrible! And I thy murderer!
'Tis I have bungled all. I thought thy sons
Stood nearer to thy heart than I, thy spouse.
And with me gone, and after some few tears,
That thou wouldst end thy life in happiness
With them, thy children dear. My foolish plan
I deemed was for the best. Alas!" He struck
His hand upon his brow, where stood the dew
In beaded drops. The Rani clasped his neck.
"'Tis nothing, husband mine. Grieve not for me."

Followed a pause, while aged man and wife
In frightened silence clung, as children do
Who hold each other trembling in the dark.
And of the two, the husband seemed more shaken,

The wife it was who comforted and showed
The stronger nerve.

“The amal draught has power
To banish fear and pain.” A pause came with
Each word, that fell a heavy drop of blood
From out an anguished heart. Right cheerily
The brave queen laughed, with ne’er a sob, nor
choke.

“I go to meet my lord. Dost think I fear
My bridal bed? That last long clasp will be
A joy, not pain. Why should I drink the draught
Would rob me of my sum of wedded bliss?”

No more was said. The flickering lamp died
down.

They let it die. Awhile in silence sat.
Then whispering, “Three hours before the morn
I must arise,” the old chief laid him down.
His old wife’s arms were round him. So they sank
Into the realm of sleep where grief, the watcher,
Sits at the portal drear.

XV

THE LAST FAREWELLS

The moon rode high,
And still the night held sway upon the plain,
When loud the sentry blew his bugle horn.
At once the shattering crash of kettle-drums
Awoke the echoes in the battlements.
The castle sprang to life with stamp of steeds
And stir of men, and women's shriller cries.
In spite of trump and drum, the Rawal lay
In heavy slumber. Sonaldevi, who
For long had lain awake, now quickly rose,
And struck a spark to light the lamp. A fire
Burned low within a brazier. She blew
It into flame and warmed a generous cup
Of ruby wine, and then she lightly touched
Her husband's shoulder. Slowly did the chief
Awake. As men grow old, each morn their souls
Are more and more unwilling to return
From that sweet land of sleep, where they will find
At length an everlasting dwelling-place.
She gently shook his arm, until he raised
His head, and sitting dazed with sleep, he took
Her thin face in his hands, and earnestly

And long he gazed upon the features old.
“It is the same,” he murmured to himself.
“So many forms, but always this one face !”
Then lightly kissed her lips. A keen glance round
Awoke him into life. The castle’s stir
And tramp aroused the warrior instinct. Swift
He threw aside the coverlet and rose
And washed his hands and face, and quickly donned
His raiment, while his wife fluttered about,
As fussy hen that trims her new-born chick,
Now choosing this, rejecting that, and all
Anxiety that he should look his best.
No servant would she call. On this last day
Each office must be hers and hers alone.

They little spoke, and ne’er alluded once
To the dread doings of the coming day.
It seemed there was no further use for tears
Or idle speech. They naught could now avail.
“What tunic shall I wear ?” His wife replied,
“The scarlet velvet with the gold brocade.
’Twas made at Delhi. ’Tis thy richest coat.”
He put it on, and carefully she smoothed
The wrinkles and adjusted the long folds.
“My turban ?” “Scarlet, too, to match thy robe.”
When all was donned the chief with roguish smile,
Opened a secret drawer and brought a box

Brass-bound and locked, no bigger than his hand.

He raised the lid and drew an aigrette forth,

A long white plume with jewels at the foot.

The Rani gave a little, happy cry.

“The jewelled plume of horse-hair which I made!

The first gift that I gave thee! Where hast thou

Preserved it with such care? Long years ago

I thought it thrown into the refuse heap.”

“No gift of thine has e’er been thrown away,”

Her husband said. “The plume safe-guarded lay

In the state treasury, more dear to me

Than mines of gold.” He bound it on his brow,

Then stood beneath the lamp-light, while she went

A tour of fond inspection round her chief.

“Now thou must eat,” she cried. “The wind is fresh,

And ’tis not well to journey fasting.” “True,”

The Rawal said. “And yet my fighting arm

Moves quicker when my waist-band’s twisted tight.”

Her hand that held the tray of bread and fruit

Shook and the bowls rattled, a moment only.

He ate but sparingly, then took the wine

And raised it at arm’s length above his head.

“To our next meeting, sweet,” he cried, and held

The silver cup to his old partner’s lips.

She touched it. Then at one deep draught he drank

The blood-red wine and hurled away the cup.

Next instant he caught up the aged dame,
And pressed her to his heart in strong embrace,
Then rudely threw her off and sped away.

And still no tears fell from her red-rimmed eyes.
At times she pressed a hand upon her brow,
But otherwise no gesture showed the grief
That raged within, a fire consuming all.
She swiftly changed her dress, then stepped outside,
And from the parapet looked down to where
The chief was marshalling his ancient band.
A sudden gust of desert wind beat down
The torches' smoky flare. She gave a cry
Of shrill dismay, and running quickly back,
She seized a woollen scarf, and with all speed
Her tottering limbs could make, descended swift
The long steep stair, and pushing through the crowd,
She reached her husband's stirrup. "Rawal mine,
Thou hast forgot thy scarf. The wind is keen.
Thou'lt catch thy death of cold." He wrapped the
cloth

About his neck, and kissed the skinny hand
That offered it. "My thanks, O queen," he said.
A soldier laughed, and suddenly her mind
Awoke to the grotesqueness of her act.
The Rawal smote the offender to the earth.
She saw it not, but placed her palsied palms

Upon her ears, and hobbled back the way
She came. Her women ran to help her, but
She waved them off. How weary were the stairs
As one by one she climbed! Anon she gained
The battlement and leaned upon the stone
Beside an arrow-slit whence she could see
The steep road winding from the castle gate.

A bugle blew, and first a white horse passed,
Bearing a kettle-drum on either side,
From which the rider's sinewy arm evoked
A savage roar. Then riding two by two
A hundred aged knights went down the hill.
And last of all—she gasped and strained her eyes—
No broken relic of humanity,
But straight and debonair, a gallant chief,
In all the pride of manly grace and strength,
The Rawal of her youth rode fair and free,
With link boys on each side, and silver white
The broad moon gleamed upon his sword and spear.
She gazed with adoration and delight
Until the vision vanished round a bend.
“It is his fetch, and thrice it has appeared,”
She whispered huskily. Again her hand
Went to her forehead. “How it beats,” she said,
“Like hammers on the brain.” With failing feet
She crawled back to the bed, and sank a heap

Of worn-out sorrow on the coverlet.

 In crowded lines upon the city wall,
The people craned, and as their Rawal passed
They shouted, "Hail to thee, great king!" He waved
His hand, replying, "Peace and long farewell
To ye, my subjects dear!" Upon the plain
Outside the city gate the veterans rode
Their steeds, and marshalled stood in one long line.
The ancients from the castle joined their rank.
The chief then rode from end to end, and made
A careful count. "Five hundred less by two,"
He said to old Bahadur at his side.
"And thou and I make up the roster full."
Then sitting in his saddle he received
The barons who remained behind. 'To each
He gave a kindly greeting. One and all
In salutation cried, "O king, our age
Is less than three score years, but give the word
Right willingly we'll ride and die with thee."
"I know it, lieges mine," their chief replied,
"And thank ye for your loyalty. The count
Is full. Your task to live and shore the realm
Upon your shoulders broad. We laid the base,
Cemented with our blood. Then take ye heed
The superstructure stands inviolate
To foes without and enemies within!"

The princes then advanced, and Rundhir said,
“We humbly thank our sire and king for lives
Of happiness, and boundless love, and gifts
Innumerable. For this last bequest,
Thy kingdom, may the great God give us strength
To follow where thy footsteps show the way!”
The thin lips tightened, but he made reply
In friendly tones, “The morrow morn will see
Ye kings. Good luck attend Your Majesties!”
And then in louder voice that all might hear,
“I pray ye take to heart and ne’er forget
The lesson which I gave on use of sword
Against the dagger. Ye may need it sore.”

And last of all the fool, Prince Kumbho Singh,
Came to the Rawal’s stirrup. “Sire,” said he,
“I pray that thou mayest see thy mother’s face
Look kindly down.” A little murmur ran
Of pity for a ruined mind through all
The listening crowd. His father understood.
“Her face to me is always kind,” he said,
“Farewell, my son,” and moved his hand to bless.

The troop then formed in double line and took
Their way due north, the Rawal at their head.
But at a furlong’s distance drew they rein,
And wheeled to face the wall. Then at a sign
Made by Bahadur Singh, they waved their spears

In farewell to the town where they had spent
Their stormy lives. And thrice the gleaming points
They waved in air, and each time came a roar
In answer from the watchers on the walls,
A farewell shout that ended in a wail.

The waste of silver plain, the white-roofed town,
The lake, the jagged rocks, and high above
The sombre castle, whence from one dark nook
A star of lamp-light gleamed, and over all
The mystic mantle of the moonbeams thrown,
He marked each detail from his horse's back,
The ancient Rawal of Marot, standing
Apart, and letting his grim eyes rove slowly
Over the well-known, well-beloved scene,
His last look caught the little point of light.

And then he cleared his throat, and roughly wheeled
The old horse round. "About and forward all !
I'd call on ye to give an answering cheer,"
He cried, "but that I know your aged throats
Are stiff and dry as bamboo sticks, and I
Would get reply in such a hoary wheeze,
That e'en our steeds would laugh and choke with mirth.
Our blood runs thick and cold, then let us try
A gallop to give warmth to our slow hearts."

XVI

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

He took the lead and o'er the desert rode,
The following column winding round the dunes,
And as he topped a sandhill he could see
The pole star twinkling 'tween his horse's ears.
So on and on with ne'er a look behind,
Until the shoulder of a hill shut out
The Towers of old Marot. Then slackening speed,
They rode at steady pace, and soon the moon,
As captive at the coming of her lord,
Grew wan before the bold sun's fiery gaze.
Bahadur, riding at the Rawal's side,
Turned round and eyed the winding line behind,
And chuckled merrily. The chief inquired,
"Why laughest thou?" "In truth, my lord," he said,
"'Tis easy seen we are a funeral,
Our faces are of such inhuman length.
The privilege is rare for living man
To attend his obsequies and be himself
His own chief mourner. We appreciate
So highly this great honour, that we feel
We must respond with show of greater woe."
The Rawal took the hint. His own grim face

Was none the shortest. "Halt!" he cried, "and front!"
Then from a hillock's top addressed his men.
"Ye've followed me to victory with smiles
Upon your lips and bounding happy hearts,
Like children going to a country fair.
For what? To steal a slice of land, waylay
A caravan, beat back presumptuous foes.
'Old Chachick's schoolboys,' I have heard ye called,
And seen ye cut your capers, play your jokes
E'en in the thick and fury of the fight.
But now we battle for a nobler gain,
A glorious heavenly throne. In two short hours
We taste the cup of immortality,
Behold the blest abodes and walk with gods.
Then why these yard-long faces of despair?
If any man regrets and cannot wipe
Away the past, nor fix his mind serene
Upon the radiant future, let him go!
The way is open. Ye are all free men."

He paused awhile, but ne'er a warrior stirred.
"What? All are willing still? Then let us show
The world our hearts are ever light as air
When trumpets blow and spears and falchions flash.
A cheer for Chachick and your noble selves!"
Five hundred grey beards wagged and rose a sound
Like wind from broken bellows, wheezing shrill.

The steeds threw up their heads, and many neighed
A loud response. "Good beasts," the Rawal cried.
"They teach us how to cheer, and truth we need
Instruction here and there." Thereat all laughed,
And, callous fatalists who cared no jot
For death and pain, they threw their cares away.
Dismissed were thoughts of wife and child and home.
Thereafter smiles and jests went round. The gloom
Of night had lifted. Keen and fresh, the wind
Of morning blew the breath of coming battle
Into their nostrils, giving them new life,
New strength and courage. Bright their old eyes shone.
And, gaily dressed in many-tinted robes,
They looked a wedding party setting forth,
Five hundred Father Times, to meet a bride
And bring her in all honour to her groom.

The march was then resumed, but when afar
They saw Kerore thrust up her pinnacles,
Again a halt was called. The Rawal said,
"We've bread and wine, then let us eat and drink,
And rest our steeds! We still have nigh an hour.
'Tis meet we do our best in this last fight.
Our troop is small. 'Tis ours to swell the line
With new recruits, that entering Suryaloca,
We gain a greater glory with the gods."
And then, as each man sat him on the ground,

And munched his bread or drank the cheery wine,
His bridle in his hand, his horse's head
Adroop above his shoulder as the beast
Were whispering secrets in his master's ear,
The chief addressed his leader of the van,
“Our steeds are of the oldest, all save thine.
I've seldom seen a charger showing more
Of blood and quality.” Bahadur glanced
At his tall stallion, champing on his curb,
A Kathiawari by the lyre-shaped ears.
The fire of youth in the large liquid eyes,
And strength and speed in every graceful line.
Then ran his eyes to right and left where stood
The aged coursers of the ancient troop.
He looked somewhat confused and stammered, “True,
The beast is young. An oversight. My slave's
Mistake. I broke his head.” And quickly turned
The subject of discourse. “In all our wars,
My chief,” he said, “we aye have vantage ta'en
Of stratagem, and oft by guile alone
Have beaten fourfold odds. In this last fight
The numbers of the forces equal stand,
But we are old and armourless, and hence
The odds are contrary. I know a scheme,
That if Your Highness will——” The chieftain laughed,
“Nay, nay, thou old war-wolf, in thy whole life

Of ceaseless combat hast not slain enough?
That now thou still must lick thy hungry chops?
Know this, we do not fight to kill. We fight
To die. In one long line, and man to man,
We make our last great charge, no trick nor wile,
But fair and open conflict. 'Tis a race
Who first will get to heaven. At the gate
Where sits Ushas, the never-ending dawn,
If any should arrive before his chief,
I bid him wait. 'Tis mine to enter first.
I will not keep him long."

He rolled his sleeve,
And showed his wasted arm. "Five years have passed
Since I have killed a man. It is a thirst
That grows with drinking. Dearly would I love
To slay once more before that I am slain.
Alas, these withered bones give little hope,
And this last fight will be the first in which
This blade has not been fleshed up to the hilt."
Bahadur cried, "Rememberest thou, O king,
That morn we left thy father's house? Of all
The two score roaring lads who followed thee,
But one is left, and he, except for joints
That creak at times, is every whit as good
A fighting man to-day as he was then.
I've never found a match except thyself,

Our champion swordsman ere the Shukr Khan
Laid hold on thee." He stretched an arm and hand
That looked a serpent petrified, so long
And brown and hard. "My fighting reach is still
Three inches longer than the longest I
Have ever met, and ere Bahadur dies,
Three souls shall go before, and twice that sum
Shall follow after to the blest abode."
The chieftain rose. "I envy thee, for thou
Wert never boaster. Come, to horse! 'The sun
Is nearing the appointed hour." They swung
To saddle, formed their column long and rode
Towards Kerore. "What men are these?" The king
Pointed to where a rise was capped with crowds,
Who huddled sat, their backs against the wind.
Bahadur said, "The bearers sent
At midnight in advance." A wave of sand
Rose high before the hoary cavalcade,
And when they climbed its crown, a thrill of joy
Ran down the line. The old backs straighter grew,
Moustaches bristled, fierce eyes flashed, and grips
Were tightened on the spear-shafts. E'en the steeds
Were fain to squeal and curvet. There beneath,
Scarce half a mile away, a Moslem troop
Were drawn across the roadway to the town,
And when they saw the greybeards pulling rein,

They shouted while their trumpets blew a note
Of joyous welcome.

“Yonder stand our hosts.

The feast is spread, and every man has brought
His carver with him,” cried the monarch old.

“Our drums and trumpets we have left behind,
But let us wave our spears to show we hear
Their welcome kind and thank their courtesy.”

The van commander said with sneering lip,

“My eyes are fairly keen, but cannot tell

A Moslem and a liar one from t’other.

The Kalu swore he’d bring an equal force.

If I have any war-craft, yonder troop

Contains eight hundred men, and see the gleam

Of countless spears beside the spur of hill

That stretches to the left. ’Tis his reserve,

His total force, nine thousand men at least,

And all to see five hundred grey beards die.”

“Thereby he strives to show us greater honour.”

“Not so, my king ! Thereby he shows distrust

Of the most solemn word. He thinks our force

Is but a bait to lure him to a trap.”

The Rawal fuming glowered on the foe

A wrathful space. At length he said, “Thou’rt right.

He shows distrust and of my royal word.

His courtesy doth merit some return.

What artifice was that thou spakest of
But half an hour ago ? ” Bahadur smiled.
“ The Mongol trick which cost us dear that day
In far Bengal. Our men and steeds are old,
But age gives this advantage. We are trained
By years of war to higher discipline.
Manœuvres we can venture with success
Would lead a younger force to certain loss.
We charge in single file, but as we near
The foe, our wings hang back as if outpaced,
And when we strike, our single line has changed
To double column which divides the foe
As sword-blade chops a rotten bit of stick.
Our head on that side and our tail on this,
We wheel towards the right and hold the foe
In front and rear, two men to one. They can
Not stand the odds. However young and strong,
From that death-grapple of our reverend selves
No man will come alive.”

“ Enough, enough,”

The Rawal cried, “ I mind the occasion well.
The Mongols slew four hundred of our best.”
He rode along the front. A few curt words,
And every veteran knew his task by heart.
Then for a moment reining back his horse,
Bahadur on his left, he shouted, “ Charge ! ”

The old steeds forward leap like skittish colts.
But half-way o'er, alas, the billow bends
Into a crescent. Vainly strive the wings
'To catch the straining centre. Loud the roar
Of laughter shakes the merry foemen's sides.
"Is this old Chachick and his famous charge?
A troop of crones would keep a straighter line."
Still more it bends and louder grows the mirth.
"Behold the dotard fools! What need to advance?
Let's stand our ground and slay them one by one."
And while their gusty laughter peals on high,
Their doom has come. The laggard wings have joined
To form a rushing tide of men which breaks
Their jeering ranks and sweeping to the right,
Flows down their line, a devastating wave
In front and rear. The foe fall thick and fast.
The old men's cunning hands ply swift their trade
Of taking life. 'Tis stab and guard and stab.
No waste of power, but steady dealing death,
Remorseless, purposeful, with subtle skill,
That seems nigh magical, and only learned
From years of constant strife. The foemen fall,
And still the wave rolls pitilessly on.

The Rawal and the captain formed the point
Of the long wedge that burst the Moslem files.
They held their spears in rest, but as they closed

Bahadur's younger charger dashed in front.
His rider put aside the opposing lance,
And with his shield he smote the foeman down.
Then leaning far across with spear outstretched,
Struck up a lance a Tartar held aimed straight
At Chachick's heart. The king next instant drove
His point into the Moslem's breast, and loud
He yelled with boyish glee, "Once more I've slain
A man. Again I've let the red blood flow,
And gained my dearest wish." Then to the right
They wheeled and charged the foemen in the rear.
The Moslem steeds were jammed and could not turn
In time to meet the rush. The Rawal stabbed
A writhing back, and shouted, "Two! Great God
Of rapturous war, I thank thee for the gift."

The madness of the battle lit his eyes.
Red waves of flame were surging in his brain.
The man was drunk with lust of slaughter fell.
He dropped his spear and drew his scimitar,
And plunged into the *melée*. Here and there
He rode, and like a maniac screamed and stabbed
And slashed until his voice was hoarser than
The carrion crows who screamed their dirge above.
And ever at his side Bahadur stayed.
His long, lean arm and double-edged sword,
The serpent and its sting, maintained a guard

About his chief as if a magic web
Were thrown around him which no steel could pierce.
And many a stroke was aimed at head and heart,
But ever found that barrier strong between.
The captain's body gaped with gory wounds.
He heeded not, but, aided by his steed's
Young fiery valour, ever kept his watch
Upon his sovereign's life.

By this the foe
Recovering from surprise, had found their mirth
Was witless to inanity. "A ruse,"
They cried. "Old Chachick has befooled us with
His cunning guile." And, boiling hot with rage,
Their right wing swept upon the Rajput troop
And lapped them round. The grey beards, in their turn
Attacked both front and rear, were trampled down
And slaughtered by the score, though to the end
They fought like tigers fierce. Bahadur glanced
About him, sighed, "The game is up," then seized
The Rawal's rein, and swinging round the steeds,
He drove them through the press and gained a rise
Some hundred yards away. "Art raving mad?"
The chief demanded, furious with wrath.
His captain gasped, "I cannot stand to see
My liege lord fall. Thou hast done wonders. Fly!
No man can call thee coward. Take my steed!

None swifter in the realm. I brought him here
To serve thy need. Thou art unwounded. Fly !”
The chieftain gave a cheery ringing laugh.
“ Old trusty hound, is this the trick thou hast played ?
I thought my luck as ever kept my head,
And marvelled how I ’scaped without a scratch.
Wilt ne’er believe I wish to die ? No chance
Near thy long arm ! Obey and leave me ! Go ! ”
His voice was stern. Bahadur wheeled his steed.
“ I go to wait thy coming. Fare thee well ! ”
Obedient to the end, the veteran old
Saluted, gave his rearing horse the spur,
And yelling, “ Three I said and three have gone ;
Three more shall follow,” plunged like thunder-bolt
Into the midmost strife. An angry swirl
Of battling men and maddened steeds, the flash
And fall of spear and sabre, one long sword
High over all the rest, a roar, “ One,”
Again “ And two ! ” The third “ And three,” was just
A dying sob. The eddy reeled away.
The hero was no more.

The Rawal gazed

A moment, then he cried, “ I shall be late
For our appointment, all through that good fool’s
Most faithful bungling.” When, in loosing rein
For his last charge, his coughing seized and rent

Him like a sudden storm, and as he stood
With blackened veins, and barked and choked for air,
A rider, young and splendidly attired,
Who had till now surveyed the scene of strife
From hill-top in the rear, rode up
And asked him, "Who art thou?" The chieftain
gasped,
"Old Chachick I, and thou?" The stranger said,
"I am the Kalu Shah." "Then slay and quick,
Or else the Shukr Khan——" He fought for breath,
But could no further speak. The Kalu said,
"Poor soul, I'll give thee air," and thrust his sword
Into the heaving chest. "The man was mad,"
He cried. "What meant he by his Shukr Khan?
The heathen has the boon he craved, but what
A price to pay for these few ancient lives!"
His glance went round the plain. In twos and threes
The last survivors of the dauntless troop
Dragged out their hopeless conflict to the end.
"Not half an hour has past, and I have lost
Six hundred men." The Rawal's sightless face
Smiled gently up. His soul was with the stars.

XVII

THE HOMECOMING

In that same hour that saw the Rawal die,
The princes climbed the stair of old Marot,
And knocked upon their mother's chamber door.
No answer came. Again they knocked, and then,
The silence reigning still, they tiptoed in.
The bent-up figure of their mother sat
Upon the bed and faced them with red eyes,
That saw yet saw not. Rundhir spoke in voice
Of deep humility and penitence.
"O mother dear, our guilt indeed is great.
We come to beg forgiveness for our sin.
We do repent in bitter grief and shame.
Wilt thou believe and let our filial love
Bring solace to thy wounded, widowed heart?"
She cut him short and screaming hoarsely, "Go!"
She pointed to the door. The frenzied tone
And furious gesture were so terrible,
Her sons shrank back appalled, and hurriedly
They stumbled from the room. "Her reason's gone,"
They whispered trembling. "Ne'er could woman sane
Speak like a tortured demon from the pit.
Pray God, 'twas not our sin unhinged her brain."

Another hour went by, when suddenly
The queen called loud for food, and tore and ate
It savagely, her actions in this hour
Of stress being wondrous like her idiot son's.
Then mounting on her litter, was borne forth
Through castle gate and down the hill-side road,
And through the town and round the little lake.
It was the last time she would ride this road ;
She knew it well, yet never once looked back.
The curtains of her litter were not drawn ;
And as she passed, the people hushed and paled,
That anguish thus should go abroad at noon.

Beyond the lake, a ponderous slab of rock
Lay like a monster of the olden time,
Who after centuries of sleep awakes
And struggling back to life, above the sand
Thrusts up his mighty armour-plated back.
And here at her direction rose the pyre,
Built high, a square of solid logs of wood,
And over all they poured long jars of oil.

Around on every side were silent groups
Engaged in the drear task of building pyres.
The work was done by men. The women sat
Apart and dumb for once with grief and fear,
And by each group a shrouded figure crouched,
The priestly victim, as the case might be,

Or willing sacrifice. And everywhere
The shouting children whooped and played as if
On holiday.

The queen paid never heed
To other happenings. When all was done
She had her litter turned towards the north,
And sitting, stared across the waste of sand,
The lake and town and towers of old Marot
Upon her right; the broad sun sinking slow
Upon her left. And when the shadow of
The pyre grew long, she was the first to see
The weird procession moving 'gainst the sky,
The bearers with their dead. At once she threw
Her grey head back and with her cracked voice raised
A shrill and awful dirge. The groups around
Joined in to swell the melancholy strain.
The people, young and old, came trooping out,
The princes and the barons, horse and foot,
They formed in deep array to meet and bring
The dead men home. And at their head the queen
And wailing women sang the funeral song.

The Rawal led the van, the pride of place.
He lay as he had fallen in the strife,
His eyes still open and the gentle smile
Upon his lips. No cover hid the face.
So had she seen him many times when he

Would lie in bed and weave his dreams of war
And conquest. Long she gazed upon the face.
“Who slew my lord, the king?” A man replied,
“It was the Kalu Shah. A trooper told
Me when the fight was o’er. Upon a height
We stood and watched the battle rage beneath.
They were apart. The Moslem thrust his sword
Into the Rawal’s breast.” “And of the foe
Were many slain?” “Some thirty score at least.
We fought like fiends. It was a gallant fight.”
“Six hundred slain,” the Rani said. “The foe
Took oath he’d bring no more than equal force.”
“The Kalu is no fool,” the man rejoined.
“He knew our ancients were not tyros. Had
He brought an equal force, the king would now
Embrace and greet thee with a living smile.
Instead he brought eight hundred men and close
Behind he held nine thousand in reserve.”

Her brooding madness burst to sudden flame.
She left her litter, rushed amid the crowd,
And panting, came to where the princes rode.
“Revenge!” she screamed. “He might be living still.
The liars have broken troth. No equal force!
The odds were all against. Revenge, revenge!”
Her voice was choked with incoherent gasps.
The princes, who had also heard the tale,

Leapt quick to earth with show of deep respect,
And tried to soothe. "The foeman granted us
The boon we craved. We sought the strife, not he.
He may have sworn, but of his own free will.
No oath did we exact. And if he brought
A greater force, it was to honour us
The more." She writhed and shook her bony fist.
"Ye dastards, are ye sunk so low that ye
Will take the part of him who slew your sire?"
"But what would'st have us do?" They waved their hands
In helpless protest to her fiery wrath.
"Revenge," she cried, "Give me the Kalu's head!
I'm famished to behold his severed throat."
"Impossible," they cried. "To do us grace
He lost six hundred men. 'Twere treachery
The blackest to repay his kindness great
By sudden onslaught with no notice given."

"And is that your last word, and will ye lift
No finger to avenge your murdered sire?"
She ceased her raving, but her self-control
Was yet more awe-inspiring than her rage.
"A mother's curse be on ye for poltroons,
And blast your souls with lasting infamy!"
She spat towards them, hobbled back and climbed
Her litter. "Quick," she said; "take up my lord,
And bring him to the pyre! My life to me

Is hell. Make haste. I long to join my king."
The sun went down. The torch-boys lit their links.
Again the sad procession onward moved.
The women wailing as they beat their breasts.
And she, the queen, ne'er uttered further sound,
But silent followed her dead Rawal's bier.

XVIII

"GIVE ME TILL DAWN"

The fool, Prince Kumbho Singh, had heard her words.
He pushed his piebald through the thronging press,
And when he stood apart, he bent to where
The jester trotted at his stirrup close.
"Friend Mendak, follow them I pray thee till
Thou hast a chance to speak to her, the queen,
My mother. Say thou art my messenger,
And this thy message, 'Give me till the dawn.'"
The Frog glanced up and thought, "What madness now
Assails our flighty brain?" But said aloud,
"What means this message? Why not go thyself?"
"I fear her face. Didst hear her words of doom?"

Her blasting curse ?” He shuddered, “No, I durst
Not venture. But thou art not of her race.
She will not harm thee. Go ! She’ll understand.
I’ll wait thee here.” The jester muttered low,
“And if I will not, then thy whip across
My back. The friend soon turns to servitor,”
But trotted off without another word.

Arrived beside the rock, the bearers placed
Her litter on the ground, then turned to lift
The Rawal to his final resting-place.
At once her robe was twitched, a yellow face
Said in her ear, “I come from Kumbho Singh.”
She shrank as if an adder stung her hand.
“The Mongol imp ! Get hence or I will have
Thee flayed alive.” He showed a dagger keen.
“But not before I dig my fang in thee,
And then thou wilt not burn alive with him,
The carrion there. I come from Kumbho Singh.
His message is, ‘Give me till dawn.’ What means
The idiot that I cannot tell. He said
That thou wouldst understand.” The curtain ran
Upon its rings across the litter’s hood.
She drew it quickly but the face had gone.
The imp had vanished in the gathering throng.

“And didst thou take my message ?” “Even so.”
“What answer did she give ?” “Why none I can

Recall, save that she kindly volunteered
To skin me if I'd stay. My eloquence alone
Preserved my life." "No answer ! Yet I'm sure
She knows and understands. Come thou with me !
Canst get a horse ? Then mount and follow quick.'
Some horses tethered stood no distance off,
Saddled and bridled, while their owners watched
On foot the obsequies. The jester seized
The best. "The prince's orders," cried he to
The groom who interposed, then galloped back
To join his master riding to the north.

"Where goest thou, my prince ?" the Mongol asked.
"We ride to Dhuniapur," the fool replied.
The jester gurgled in his blank dismay.
"I'm lost for good and all," he thought, "for when
His madness drives, Great God alone can tell
The sequel sad." Then asked, "My puissant lord,
The way is long. Dost thou indeed require
The service of an atom such as I ?"
The prince replied, "'Tis borne into my mind,
I know not how, that I shall need thy aid.
So thou must come." He spurred his steed. The dwarf
Was fain to follow, though he groaned aloud,
"I e'en must see it through. I cannot flee.
The mare would catch me ere I'd gone a mile."
And thus the strangely assorted pair, the prince

And Mongol, fool and dwarf, at gallop rode
Across the sand, the way the Rawal took
In his last ride a dozen hours ago.

The dead men lay upon their funeral pyres.
The Brahmans chanted hymns, and incense burnt.
The widows stood beside their silent lords.
A torch was handed each, and each at once
With hand unfaltering, lit the wooden pile,
Then clasped her husband in her arms, while loud
The women wailed their final, farewell dirge.
The plain was hidden with the rolling smoke.
The bright flames upward soared, then died away,
Leaving behind a glowing core of fire.
The souls were sped, the sacrifice complete.
And some were old and withered, others fair,
With bloom of golden youth ; but, Rajputs all,
They met their deaths in silence : ne'er a cry,
Nor sob was uttered by those tortured lips.

But she, the queen, beside the lofty pyre
Built high upon the massive slab of rock,
Sat motionless. A priest held up a torch.
She took it, beat it out upon the rock,
Then laid it at her side, and called for flint
And steel, and these she put beside the torch.
Then covering her lord's face with a cloth,
She crouched in silence, looking to the north.

The watchers murmured in amaze, "Is she
Afraid?" A torch flared up and redly shone
Upon her eagle face and rigid lips,
And staring, blood-shot eyes. No faintest shade
Of fear was there. The flaming pyres around
Burnt slowly out, but she nor moved nor spake.

Then Birsil said, "Why waits our mother dear?"
The princes stood upon the city-wall.
Rundhir replied, "I know not, though I fear
Her grief has turned her brain. She must e'en go
Her way and have her will. For thrice the wealth
Of my new kingdom would I fear to face
Again the dreadful terror of her eyes."

The fires died out. The ashes of the dead
Were gathered to be cast upon the stream
Of Mother Ganga many leagues away.
Returned the weary mourners to their homes,
Deserted grew the plain, but still the king's
Huge pyre rose black and cold, and by it crouched
The little bending figure, chin on hand.
The hours went by and yet she never moved.
For forty years she had exchanged no word
With him her idiot son, but aye had loathed
And spurned him. Now, when others failed, he sent
The solitary message of his life,
"Give me till dawn," and she had understood.

Their madness linked the mother to the son.
In this last night he was her only friend.
An atmosphere of dread and mystery
Hung o'er her waiting, watching, hour by hour.
The crowds of people on the battlements
Looked down and pointed. None would venture near.

XIX

THE KALU'S HEAD

When prince and jester reached Kerore, the fool
Drew rein. "The night is young," he said. "We'll bait
And rest our steeds, then gently forward ride.
'Tis good we nurse the brutes, for on return
Our pace will be no sluggard's." From the town
The dwarf procured some food for man and beast.
The prince himself first watered, groomed, then fed
His mare, the while he hummed his wordless song,
Or talked to her as to a comrade true.
They rested by the gateway's gloomy arch,
And while they ate their bread and meat, the dwarf
Inquired, "My lord, thou hast not yet informed
Thy humble slave what errand takes us both

To Dhuniapur? Dost know the enemy
Are camped thereby and in no loving mood?"
The prince replied, "Our work is of the simplest.
We go to take and bring the Kalu's head."

The jester, who had hoped their errand wild
Would prove to be some foolish freak, and that
His charge's crack-brained folly would afford
A safeguard e'en with Moslem infidels,
Now choked, and stuttering with amazement cried,
"My lord, 'tis certain death." The prince replied,
"'Tis true. 'Tis certain that he dies to-night."
"I mean 'tis death to us. How canst thou force
Thy way through thousands in an armed camp?
Thou ne'er hast seen, so how wilt know the Shah?
And if 'tis difficult to enter in,
Our exit will be sheer impossible."

Upon his eyes the prince pressed both his hands.
"I see him clear as day. His tent is striped.
His pennon flies above. Face upward as
He lies, I see a mole upon his brow.
One ear, the left, has lost its lobe. I know
'Tis he. The rest is blurred, indefinite,
And comes and goes, a patchwork of quick gleams.
But these two pictures stand out bright and clear,
The Kalu sleeping, and his gory head
Held high by one who watches by a pyre."

The Mendak muttered, "'Tis the second sight."
His voice was hushed with awe. "And dost thou see
Thyself?" "In flashes only. Here my hands
Are wet with blood, and there I fight and ride.
But always in the end a blinding mist
That blots out everything." 'The jester's teeth
Were chattering as he questioned once again.
"And canst thou see thy slave?" "In pieces diverse.
Thy head, an arm, a hand, but never whole."
"And in the end?" "And in the end the mist
Encircles thee." The Moslem groaned, "My lord,
I, too, do feel a strange presentiment.
A ghostly voice is whispering in my ear,
'Leave not Kerore. 'Tis there thou canst afford
'Thy master aid when danger presses nigh.'"
Again Prince Kumbho closed his eyes and mused,
"I see thine arm go with me and it gives
Effectual aid in urgent need. 'Thine is
A lying voice. 'Thou canst not stay behind."

The Mongol sank into himself. "No hope!
'Twas my last chance to trick him with a lie.
A midnight ride to certain death with this
Poor royal lunatic, is this the end
To all my jokes and laughter-loving gibes?
In truth it is the merriest jest of all.
But then the prophecy the Gaya witch

ore told, how can it come to pass? Ah well!
he gods can lie as well as sinful men.
o I must go. Then why increase the pang
y harbouring coward fear?" He struck his breast,
nd drew himself erect. Suspense had made
him quail. With certainty there came the cool
nd reckless courage of the fatalist,
nd master of himself, he was again
he tongue-in-cheek, grimacing Mongol imp
Of old Marot.

The fool glanced upward at the moon. "'Tis time
to ride," he said. The soldiers of the guard
and some few curious townsmen came to bid
farewell to their mad prince. "Another freak,
some frantic folly," whispered they. "Poor soul,
the moon is at the full." And sagely nodded
One to the other, marvelling what brought
the prince at midnight to their lonely town.

He answered their salute with cheery word
And kindly smile, then shook his bridle rein,
And fool and mannikin went on their way,
still heading to the north. "Hast thou thy sword?"
The former asked. "And dagger too," the dwarf
Replied and proudly touched their tiny hilts.
"'Tis well, my Frog. Thou'lt need them," said the prince.
'I carry but a sword. It will suffice.'

Two hours they rode, when on the skyline far
They saw the ruined tower of Dhuniapur
Rise dark and gaunt, and close in front, the camp
Lay outlined by its many twinkling fires.
“ Their sentries stand upon the hither side,”
Prince Kumbho said, “ yet danger often comes
Whence least expected. Let us prove the proverb ! ”
They made a circuit large until the tower
Stood 'twixt them and the camp. “ Thy beast will neigh,
And mar our plans. Best tie him to a stone.”
The dwarf climbed down, but finding only sand,
He hobbled with a cord the stallion's feet.
“ And Lallu there,” he said ; “ 'twere surely wise
To tie her too.” “ What ! tie my sweetheart,” cried
The prince. “ She has a human wit. The maid
Would break her heart did we not trust her sense.
No bonds for her. She'll never play the dunce.”

He rode at foot-pace, sheltering 'neath the dunes,
The dwarf his stirrup held. The heavy sand
Muffled all sound except the clink of bit
And Mendak's breathing as he plodded on.
Two miles of trudging and they reached the tower.
The prince dismounted, whispered to the mare,
And fondled her. She nibbled at his sleeve,
As though she said, “ I know and will obey.”
Then stood in hiding by a broken ramp,

Quite motionless. No whisk of tail, nor flick
Of ear to show she was a living steed
And not a carven stone.

The men stole on
Within the shadow of the tower and wall.
Anon they saw the camp before them spread,
When sinking to the ground, they forward crept,
Their breasts upon the sand, with watchful eyes
And wary ears for ever on the strain.
And once the night patrol rode by, but cast
A careless glance upon two corpses prone
And stiff in grisly attitude of death.
The captain laughed. "The dogs had crawled so far
To find that fate was not to be denied.
I marvel that the jackals let them lie."
"The jacks are gluttons to their wisdom teeth,"
Another cried and laughed a loud guffaw.
But when they passed, the corpses woke to life,
And glided on and scrambled through the ditch,
And up the wall, to drop all noiselessly
Upon the further side.

The prince had gauged
The truth. No sentries paced their round. The camp
Unguarded lay. Around their many fires
The foe were sleeping, wrapped in cloaks of fur.
Some ragged tents of goatskin showed where slept

The Tartar captains. In the centre rose
A larger tent of canvas made in stripes,
And from the comb the Moslem pennon hung.
Prince Kumbho pointed. "Even as I said,"
He whispered to the dwarf. Again they crawled
Upon their faces prone, and in the lee
Of friendly sandbank gained the nearest fire.
Then rising cautiously, they boldly kicked
The logs into a blaze and warmed their hands.
Thereafter strolled with air of unconcern,
Erect and making no disguise, towards
Another ring of sleepers. Here again
They stirred the fire as if it were their task.
And so by progress slow and gradual,
They made their way towards the central tent.
At last they reached ten paces from their goal.
And here upon each corner of the tent
They saw a sentry posted, but the head
Sunk down upon the knees and squatting form
Showed that each man was wrapped in slumber deep.

The prince now left the dwarf, and boldly walked
Across the space between. The guard slept on.
No sound was heard except the stertorous snore
Of thousands sleeping, and afar the wail
Of jackals at their feast. He raised the flap,
And swiftly entered in. The Mongol winked.

"The plot doth thicken," murmured he, and shook
His shaggy head. "Good-bye, my friend! 'Tis my
Last shake of thee. He said it. We shall soon
Dismembered lie. I do adjure ye all,"
He touched his arms and legs, "as spirit limbs
To join again, and decently and whole
Present yourselves before the golden gate.
And let there be no jealous rivalry
To see who'll first arrive."

He pricked his ear.

A blow had fallen, very faint and soft,
But still he heard it. Then the flap was raised.
The prince came quickly out and strode across,
And in his hand he bore a severed head.
But what a change those minutes five had wrought.
The prince who entered was a warrior cool,
His brain alert with wile and stratagem.
The man who issued was a maniac,
His gestures savage, and his eyes alight
With wild insanity. The dwarf looked up.
"My God, his madness is upon him! We
Are all undone. I feared the tension was
Too great," he cried, and drew his puny sword.
The prince swung round the dripping head and wiped
His blood-stained scimitar upon the hair.
"Tis Kalu Shah," he screamed. "Behold the mole,

And maimed ear ! All happened as I said.
It is a jest, the wittiest ever made.
A joke by every rule, and I must laugh.”
Again he made his cachinnation weird,
Hyena-like, and danced and laughed and yelled.

At once the startled sleepers sprang to arms,
And scores of men with brandished weapons rushed
Upon the insensate prince. An iron mace
Struck down the arm that held the trophy red.
The shattered limb dropped powerless. The head
Went rolling o’er the ground. The madman roared,
“Seize it, my Mendak ! This is then the task
For which I brought thee.” Swift the Frog sprang forth,
Snatched up the skull and tucked it ’neath his arm.
“Now back to back ! We’ll show them how to fight.”
His sword went sweeping round. The blow and stab,
Parry and thrust were quick as lightning flashes
Upon a summer night. His blazing eyes
Saw everything. It seemed not one man fought,
But five. The dwarf was at his back, almost
Between his legs, a vicious cat that snarled,
And sprang and scratched, and high above the din
The maniac laughter screeched. The foe hung back.
“Fit arrow to a bow,” a Tartar cried.
“The man is mad ! Why should we lose a limb ?”
When suddenly the laughter ceased, and shrill

And loud the madman whistled once,—twice,—thrice;
And ere the last note rang into the air,
They heard an answering whinny from the tower,
And clatter of the stones upon the wall.

A big, upstanding piebald mare leapt light
The barrier, rushed at break-neck speed, and clove
Herself a surging pathway through the crowd.
“ ’Tis Lallu,” cried the prince. “Stand clear to jump!”
The dwarf dropped sword and knife, and hung the head
By its long hair between his strong, white teeth.
Then grasped the prince’s belt, and as the mare
An instant stayed, the fool and mannikin
Leapt to her back. The next, the piebald sprang
Into her raking stride. The foe were flung
To left and right as water parts before
A swift ship’s prow. A baffled roar arose.
“To horse and chase, and call the guard to pull
Their arrows to the ear!”

“So far, so good,”

The madman laughed. “The wall,” the Mendak gasped
Between his clenched teeth. “Have thou no fear,”
The prince replied. “She’ll fly it like a bird.
Cling tight!” His right hand held the rein. His sword
He had dropped ere mounting. Twice the mare reached
out

To feel her bit, then shortened in her stride,

And with three bucking jumps she neared the wall.
Each moment gathering impetus, she rose
Upon her brawny quarters, sprang in air,
And with one mighty leap she cleared the wall
And yawning ditch beyond, and once again,
Without a check, she swung into her stride.
“Good leap, my darling! ’Twas an eagle’s swoop,”
The prince enraptured cried, and as he spoke,
They heard the twang of bowstrings from the wall.
A flight of arrows sang like buzzing bees,
And Kumbho Singh dropped rein and forward fell
Upon the piebald’s neck. A quivering bolt
Stood bedded in the shoulder-blade. The dwarf
Heaved back with all his force upon the belt,
Until the prince regained the saddle tree.
The little man then felt a numbness creep
Across his waist. His eyes began to swim,
And in his turn he reeled and nearly fell.
“What is it, Frog?” “An arrow in my back.
It feels like red-hot fire.” “No matter, friend!
I wear its fellow, and it is not cool.”
“Your Highness, shall I draw it?” “Nay, thou
wouldst
Draw out my life, and I must live till dawn.”
He glanced above. “Two hours and thirty miles!
’Twill kill my bonny mare, but she must do it.”

The piebald galloped with a swallow flight,
Her head low down as if she hugged the ground.
No strength was wasted. Mile by mile the plain,
The sand and rocks and dunes flowed past them like
A stream. A troop of Moslem horse pursued
For two long leagues, but never gained a yard,
So strong and swift she ran. The double weight
Seemed nothing to those muscle-bands of steel.
The prince's left arm loosely swung. His head
Was bent. His right hand clutched the mane. The rein
Hung free. At times he hummed his dreary song,
But wearily. The dwarf was sitting hunched,
And clinging tight with both his hands and feet,
Like some grey ape upon a rocking bough,
When winds are high. Between his teeth the head
Still hung. The prince's warm blood dripped upon
His hair. He felt his own blood flowing slow
From the hot well of flame which burnt his back,
Yet, in his semi-consciousness, his mind
Was irritated that the prince's word
Was not fulfilled. "My body is complete,"
He murmured. "Arms and legs attached, and I
Looked forward to dismemberment. The truth
Is beautiful," this chief of liars moaned.
"I would she had more worshippers devout."

XX

HIS MOTHER'S KISS

The grey light stole into the eastern sky.
The grey was changed to red, and this again
Grew golden with the glorious rays of morn,
When o'er the brow of sand, which all the night
The queen's old eyes had watched so hungrily,
There floundered up a weary piebald mare.
The gallop long and free was shortened to
A shuffling amble. Heavily her flanks
Were labouring for breath. Her eyes were glazed,
Her weak knees trembling, yet she bravely strove
To gather all her force for one last burst.

The riders clung unconscious, fingers clenched
To mane or saddle with the iron grip
Of drowning men. No sign of life they gave,
Save that the prince's armed heel at times
Struck feeble blows upon the streaming sides.
The queen rose quickly, daring scarce to breathe
With joy of hope's accomplishment at last.
The people on the wall sent up a shout.
The riders stirred and raised their drooping heads.
The gallant mare to desperate effort roused
Her failing powers. The goal was almost reached

When came the end as sudden as a blow.
She pitched upon her knees, turned gently o'er,
Gave one long groan, and breathed her life away.
The prince was thrown upon his shattered arm,
And rolling, broke the arrow in his back.
He rose without a cry, took up the head—
He had to tear it from the Mongol's teeth—
And then, with ne'er a glance at steed or dwarf,
He lurched and staggered to the granite rock,
And climbing, gave the trophy to the queen.
“The Kalu's head,” he said, and shook his voice
With fear or deadly weakness. Swift the queen
Snatched at the relic, held it up on high,
With savage exultation struck the cheeks
And tore the tangled locks. Then scrambled up
The wooden pile to where her aged lord
Lay in his high and stately majesty.
She placed the trophy 'neath the dead man's head.
“Sleep on, my love,” she cried. “Thy pillow soft
Was sent by sweet revenge.” With frenzied haste
She struck the flint and steel and lit her torch,
And brought the blazing tow to touch the pyre,
Whose black logs sprang at once to fanning life.
The prince had followed on his mother's steps,
And climbed the pyre with halting, stumbling feet.
For the first time the queen now turned to him.

“ My son,” she said. “ My brave and noble son ! ”
And kissed him on the brow, then crying loud,
“ I come, my lord and king,” she threw herself
Beside the ancient chief and laid her head
Upon his breast. The flames began to roar.
The prince stood dazed. “ My mother’s kiss,” he said,
“ The kiss of death,” and sank upon the pyre.

A furry ball dragged out from underneath
The fallen mare. It rolled as if ’twere drunk,
And screamed with husky voice, “ The prophecy ! ”
Then rolling, staggering, lurching, on it crept,
The arrow shaft still trailing at its waist,
And reached the rock and climbed. The tongues of
flame
Leapt high. It did not flinch, but crawled its way
From log to log, until it gained at length
The Rawal’s bier. Then throwing up his arms,
It screamed once more, “ The witch’s prophecy !
A royal bed for me ! ”

The furnace roared.
The black smoke wrapped the pyre with funeral pall,
And scattered farewell wreaths above the bier,
When rose the sun, the imperial lord of day,
And tipped with gold the towers of old Marot.

APPENDIX

BEING EXTRACTS FROM COLONEL
TOD'S "ANNALS OF RAJASTHAN"

THE ROMANCE OF THE TWISTED SPEAR

THE piety and charity of Bando Rao of Bundi could not shield him from adversity. His two youngest brothers, urged by the temptation of power, abandoned their faith, and with the aid of the royal power of Delhi, expelled him from Bundi, where under their new titles of Samarcandi and Umarcandi, they jointly ruled eleven years. Bando retired to Matoonda, in the hills, where he died after a reign of twenty-one years, and where his cenotaph still remains. He left two sons : 1st, Narayn Das, and 2nd, Nirbudh, who had Matoonda.

Narayn had grown up to manhood in this retreat ; but no sooner was he at liberty to act for himself, than he assembled the Haras of the Pathar, and revealed his determination to obtain Bundi or perish in the attempt. They swore to abide his fortunes. After the days of mourning were over, he sent to his Islamite uncles a complimentary message, intimating his wish to pay his respects to them ; and not suspecting danger from a youth brought up in obscurity, it was signified that he might come.

With a small but devoted band he reached the square, where he left his adherents, and alone repaired to the palace. He ascended to where both the uncles were seated almost unattended. They liked not the resolute demeanour of the youth, and tried to gain a passage which led to a subterranean

apartment ; but no sooner was this intention perceived, than the double-edged sword of Bando's son cut the elder to the ground, while his lance reached the other before he got to a place of security. In an instant, he severed both their heads, with which he graced the shrine of Bhawani, and giving a shout to his followers in the square, their swords were soon at work upon the Moslems. Every true Hara supported the just cause, and the dead bodies of the apostates and their crew were hurled with ignominy over the walls. To commemorate the exploit and the recovery of Bundi from these traitors, the pillar on which the sword of the young Hara descended when he struck down Samarcandi, and which bears testimony to the vigour of his arm, is annually worshipped by every Hara on the festival of the Dasehra.

Narayn Das became celebrated for his strength and prowess. He was one of those undaunted Rajputs who are absolutely strangers to the impression of fear, and it might be said of danger and himself, "that they were brothers whelped the same day, and he the elder." Unfortunately these qualities were rendered inert from the enormous quantity of opium he took, which would have killed most men ; for it is recorded he could at one time eat the weight of seven pice. A pice is equal in weight to a halfpenny. One pice weight is a common dose for an ordinary Rajput, but would send the uninitiated to eternal sleep. The consequence of this vice, as might be expected, was a constant stupefaction, of which many anecdotes are related. Being called to aid the Rana Raemal, then attacked by the Pathans of Mandu, he set out at the head of five hundred select Haras. On the first day's march, he was taking his siesta, after his usual dose, under a tree, his mouth wide open, into which the flies had unmolested ingress, when a young *tailani* (daughter of an oilman) came to draw water at the well, and on learning that this was Bundi's prince on his way to aid

the Rana in his distress, she observed, "If he gets no other aid than his, alas for my prince!" "The opium-eater has quick ears but no eyes," is a common adage in Rajwarra. "What is that you say?" roared the Rao, advancing to her. Upon her endeavouring to excuse herself, he observed, "Do not fear, but repeat it." In her hand she had an iron crow-bar, which the Rao, taking it from her, twisted until the ends met round her neck. "Wear this garland for me," said he, "until I return from aiding the Rana, unless in the interim you can find some one strong enough to unbind it."

Chitor was closely invested; the Rao moved by the intricacies of the P'athar, took the royal camp by surprise, and made direct for the tent of the generalissimo, cutting down all in his way. Confusion and panic seized the Moslems, who fled in all directions. The Bundi drums struck up; and as the morning broke, the besieged had the satisfaction to behold the invaders dispersed and their auxiliaries at hand. Rana Raemal came forth, and conducted his deliverer in triumph to Chitor. All the chiefs assembled to do honour to Bundi's prince, and the ladies behind the curtain felt so little alarm at their opium-eating knight, that the Rana's niece determined to espouse him, and next day communicated her intentions to the Rana. Narayn Das was too courteous a cavalier to let any fair lady die for his love; the Rana was too sensible of his obligation not to hail with joy any mode of testifying his gratitude, and the nuptials of the Hara and Ketu were celebrated with pomp. With victory and his bride, he returned to the Bundi valley; where however the flower of gloomy Dis soon gained the ascendant even over Kamdeo (the god of love) and his doses augmented to such a degree that "he scratched his lady instead of himself, and with such severity that he marred the beauty of the Mewari." In the morning, perceiving what had happened, yet being assailed

with no reproach, he gained a reluctant victory over himself and consigned the opium-box to her keeping. Narayn Das ruled thirty-two years, and left his country in tranquillity and much extended to his only son, Rao Suju.

THE STORY OF PUNNA, THE NURSE

ON the death of Rana Sanga, his eldest son Rutna succeeded to the throne of Chitor. He ruled five years, but at the festival of the spring hunt, he met the Rao of Bundi, with whom he had a feud. A quarrel arose, and the two princes fell by each other's weapons. The next king was Bikramajit. He was insolent, passionate and vindictive, and utterly regardless of that respect which his proud nobles rigidly exacted. He passed his time among wrestlers, prize-fighters, and foot-soldiers, on whom he lavished those gifts and that approbation to which the aristocratic Rajput, the equestrian order of Rajasthan, arrogated exclusive right. He had learned from his Moslem foes the superiority of foot-soldiers, who were necessary for the protection of the artillery, but the Rajput noble cursed "those vile guns," which render of little value the lance of many a gallant soldier, and preferred to fall with dignity from his steed, to descending to an equality with his mercenary antagonist.

An open rupture occurred between the chief and his nobles, of which Bahadur Shah, Sultan of Guzerat, determined to take advantage. He easily brushed aside Bikramajit, and then laid siege to Chitor. Karnavati, one of the surviving queens of Rana Sanga, sent the Rakhi to the Emperor Humayun, begging for his aid. The festival of the Rakhi is in spring, and it is one of the few when an

intercourse of gallantry of the most delicate nature is established between the fair sex and the cavaliers of Rajasthan. Though the bracelet may be sent by maidens, it is only on occasions of urgent necessity or danger. The Rajput dame bestows with the Rakhi, the title of adopted brother; and while its acceptance secures to her all the protection of a *cavaliere servante*, scandal itself never suggests any other tie to his devotion. He may hazard his life in her cause and yet never receive a smile in reward, for he cannot even see the fair object who, as brother of her adoption, has constituted him her defender. But there is a charm in the mystery of such a connection, never endangered by close observation, and the loyal to the fair may well attach a value to the public recognition of being the *Rakhi bund bhai*, the bracelet-bound brother of a princess. The intrinsic value of such a pledge is never looked to, nor is it requisite it should be costly, though it varies with the means and rank of the donor, and may be of flock silk and spangles, or gold chains and gems. The acceptance of the pledge and its return is by the *katchli* or corset, of simple silk or satin, or gold brocade and pearls.

Humayun abandoned his conquests in Bengal, and marched to the succour of Chitor. But instead of hastening to attack the foe he commenced a pedantic war of words with Bahadur, punning on the word "Chitor." The garrison inside the city abandoned hope. Queen Karnavati's infant son, Udai Singh, was placed in safety with Surtan, prince of Bundi. A funeral pyre was raised and the women were burnt. Queen Karnavati led the procession of thirteen thousand willing victims, who went to their doom. The men, putting on their saffron robes, threw open the gates, and rushed out to cut their way through or perish in the attempt. Humayun then marched up, expelled the foe from Chitor, and sending for Bikramajit, reinstated him on his father's throne.

Bikramajit had learned nothing from adversity. He renewed all his former insolence to his chiefs, and so entirely threw aside his own dignity, and the reverence universally shown to old age, as to strike in open court Kerem Chand of Ajmer, the protector of his father Sanga in his misfortunes. The assembly rose with one accord at this indignity to their order; and as they retired, the Chondawat leader Kanji, the first of the nobles, exclaimed, "Hitherto, brother chiefs, we have had but a smell of the blossom, but now we shall be obliged to eat the fruit;" to which the insulted Pramara added, as he hastily retired, "To-morrow its flavour will be known."

The nobles, on leaving their unworthy prince, repaired to Bunbeer, the natural son of the heroic Prithwi Raj, and offered to seat him on the throne of Chitor. At first he resisted the solicitation, but afterwards gave his consent. The step between the deposal and death of a king is necessarily short, and the cries of the females, which announced the end of Bikramajit were drowned in the acclamations raised on the elevation of the *changi* over the head of the bastard Bunbeer. But Prince Udai Singh was still alive, and Bunbeer only awaited the approach of night to remove with his own hands this obstacle to his ambition. Udai Singh was about six years of age. He had gone to sleep after his rice and milk, when his nurse was alarmed by screams from the *rawala* (the women's quarters), and the barber, coming in to take away the remains of the dinner, informed her of the cause, the assassination of the Rana. Aware that one murder was the precursor of another, the faithful nurse put her charge into a fruit basket, and covering it with leaves, she delivered it to the barber, enjoining him to escape with it from the fort. Scarcely had she time to substitute her own infant in the room of the prince, when Bunbeer, entering, inquired for him. Her lips refused their

office, she pointed to the cradle, and beheld the murderous steel buried in the heart of her babe. The little victim to fidelity was burnt amidst the tears of the *rawala*, the inconsolable household of their late sovereign, who supposed that their grief was given to the last pledge of the illustrious Sanga. The nurse was a Rajputni of the Khichi tribe, her name Punna, or the diamond. Having consecrated with her tears the ashes of her child, she hastened after that she had preserved. But the little prince turned out a coward, and well had it been for Mewar had the poniard fulfilled its intention, and had the annals never recorded the name of Udai Singh in the catalogue of her princes.

THE WOOING OF THE STRONG MAID

PRINCE URSI, the eldest son of Rana Lakamsi, being out on a hunting expedition in the forest of Ondwa with some young chiefs of the court, in pursuit of the boar entered a field of maize, when a female offered to drive out the game. Pulling one of the stalks of the maize, which grows to the height of ten or twelve feet, she pointed it, and, mounting the platform made to watch the corn, impaled the hog, dragged him before the hunters, and departed. Though accustomed to feats of strength and heroism from the nervous arms of their countrywomen, the act surprised them. They descended to the stream at hand, and prepared the repast, as is usual, on the spot. The feast was held and comments were passing on the fair arm which had transfixed the boar, when a ball of clay from a sling fractured a limb of the prince's steed. Looking in the direction whence it came, they observed the same damsel from her elevated stand, preserving

her fields from ærial depredators. This stand is fixed upon four poles in the middle of a field, on which a guard is placed, armed with a sling and clay balls, to drive away the ravens, peacocks and other birds that destroy the corn. Seeing the mischief she had occasioned, she descended to express her regret, and then returned to her pursuit. As they were proceeding homewards after the sports of the day, they again encountered the damsel, with a vessel of milk on her head, and leading in either hand a young buffalo. It was proposed in frolic, to overturn her milk, and one of the companions of the prince dashed rudely by her ; but without being disconcerted, she entangled one of her charges with the horse's limbs, and brought the rider to the ground. On inquiry, the prince discovered that she was the daughter of a poor Rajput of the Chundano tribe. He returned the next day to the same quarter and sent for her father, who came and took his seat with perfect independence close to the prince, to the merriment of his companions, which was checked by Ursi asking his daughter to wife. They were not more surprised by the demand being refused. The Rajput, on going home, told the more prudent mother, who scolded him heartily, made him recall the refusal and seek the prince. They were married, and the famous Rana Hamir was the son of the Chundano Rajputni.

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

HIS old enemies, the Langas, made head against Chachick and drove his garrison from the new possession of Dbuniapur. Disease at length seized on Rawal Chachick, after a long course of victorious warfare, in which he subdued various

tracts of country even to the heart of the Punjab. In this state he determined to die as he had lived, with arms in his hands ; but having no foe near with whom to cope, he sent an embassy to the Langa prince of Multan, to beg as a last favour, the *juddān*, or gift of battle, that his soul might escape by the steel of his foeman, and not fall a sacrifice to slow disease. The prince, suspecting treachery, hesitated ; but the Bhatti messenger pledged his word that his master only wished an honourable death, and that he would only bring five hundred men to the combat. The challenge being accepted, the Rawal called his clansmen around him, and on recounting what he had done, seven hundred select Rajputs, who had shared in all his victories, volunteered to take the last field, and make oblation of their lives with their leader. Previous to setting forth he arranged his affairs. He had five sons. Birsil the eldest, was made heir to all his dominions, except the land of Khadal (capital Deorawal) which he bestowed upon Rundhir, and to both he gave the *tika*, making them separate states. Birsil marched to Kerore his capital at the head of seventeen thousand men. Meanwhile Chachick marched to Dhuniapur to part with life. There he heard that the prince of Multan was within two *kos*. His soul was rejoiced ; he performed his ablutions, worshipped the sword, bestowed charity, and withdrew his thoughts from the world. The battle lasted two hours, and the Jadu prince fell with all his kin, after performing prodigies of valour. Two thousand Khans fell beneath their swords, rivers of blood flowed in the field, but the Bhatti gained the abode of Indra, who shared his throne with the hero. The king crossed the Behah, and returned to Multan.

While Rundhir was performing at Deorawal the rites of the twelve days of *matum* or mourning, his elder brother Kumbho, afflicted with insanity, rushed into the assembly and swore to avenge his father's death. That day he

departed, accompanied by a single slave, and reached the prince's camp. It was surrounded by a ditch eleven yards wide, over which the Bhatti leaped his horse in the dead of night, reached the *harem*, and cut off the head of Kalu Shah with which he rejoined his brethren at Deorawal.

THE END